

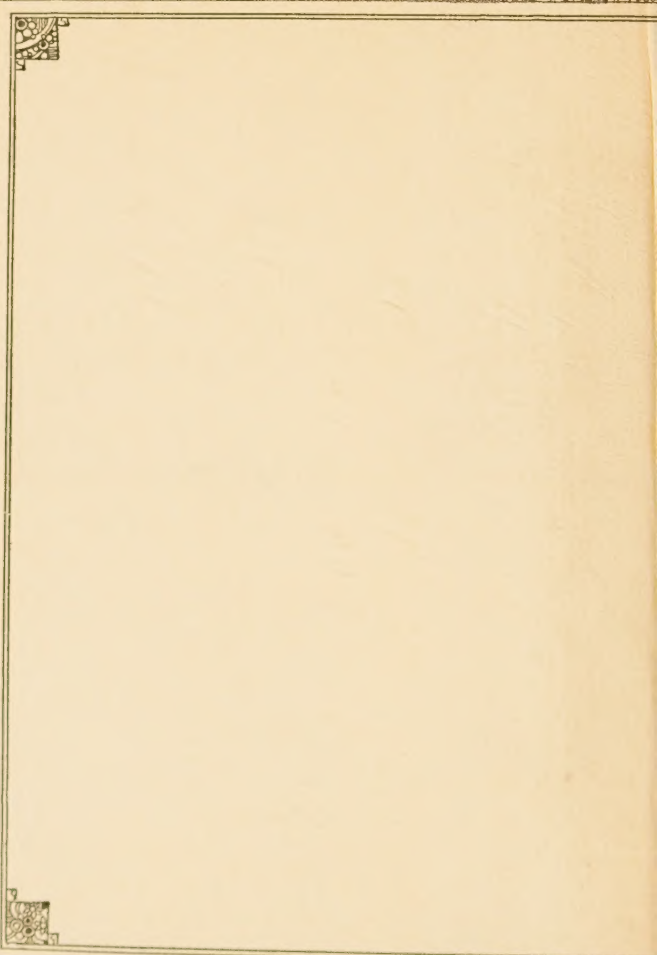
BOMBA ^{THE} JUNGLE BOY

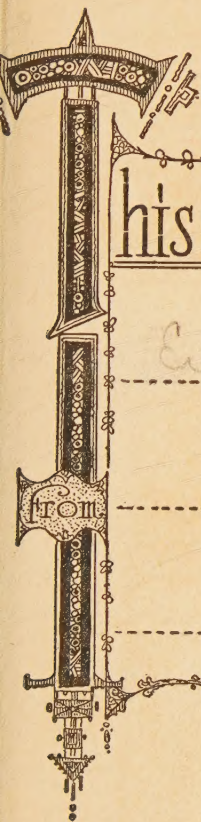
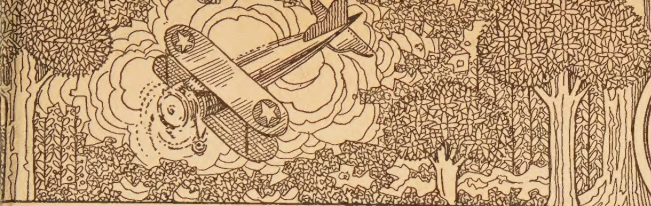
on the UNDERGROUND RIVER



ROY ROCKWOOD

ROY ROCKWOOD





his is my Book

Eugene Hannell





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WITH THE UTMOST CARE THEY WENT FORWARD.
"Bomba the Jungle Boy on the Underground River." (See page 189)

BOMBA
THE JUNGLE BOY
ON THE
UNDERGROUND
RIVER

OR
The Cave of Bottomless Pits

BY
ROY ROCKWOOD

AUTHOR OF "BOMBA THE JUNGLE BOY," "THE CITY BEYOND
THE CLOUDS," "DAVE DASHAWAY FLYING SERIES,"
ETC.

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By ROY ROCKWOOD

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BOMBA THE JUNGLE BOY ON THE UNDERGROUND RIVER
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BOMBA THE JUNGLE BOY ON THE UNDERGROUND RIVER

CHAPTER I

CROUCHED FOR A SPRING

"WE will stop here and eat."

It was Bomba, the jungle boy, who spoke when the curious party of four came to a halt in a clearing of the great Amazonian jungle.

"It is well, Master," assented Gibo, a tall, stalwart Indian, as he laid aside his bow and war club. "The way has been long and the sun has been hot."

He motioned to Neram, his fellow servant, and the two began their preparations for a simple meal.

"No, Bomba, it were better to push on," interposed Sobrinini, the only feminine member of the party, an ancient hag-like woman, whose face retained no traces of its former beauty that had

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once brought kings and princes to her feet, and whose eyes had in them the gleam of a disordered mind. "The heart of Sobrinini is sore until she can prove to Bomba that she has told him the truth."

"Bomba does not think that Sobrinini has spoken to him with a forked tongue," said the jungle boy soothingly. "And Sobrinini needs rest. Else will she faint and fall before we reach the journey's end."

The woman looked at him searchingly.

"The journey's end for Sobrinini will come sooner than Bomba thinks," she prophesied.

"How will it come?" asked the jungle boy, more to humor the demented creature than because he believed in her claim to second sight.

"Ah, that is more than Sobrinini can tell just now," was the reply. "But it is coming, and coming soon. If Sobrinini had her beloved snake with her now, it would whisper in her ear and tell her what she wants to know."

A waft of wind at the moment brushed one of her long floating locks of gray hair against her throat.

Instantly she seized it and pressed it close against her neck, crooning to it the while.

"It is Azra, my pet!" she cried delightedly, thinking she was fondling one of the snakes over which she had such a mysterious power. "Azra

is wise. Speak, Azra, and tell Sobrinini when comes her journey's end."

It was an eerie sight, and it chilled the blood in Bomba's veins. It recalled to him the dreadful night when he had first seen Sobrinini, the witch woman, dancing on the soil of her Island of Snakes, with the slimy creatures winding themselves in festoons about her throat and body.

Gibo and Neram looked on, terrified.

"She is a woman accursed," muttered Gibo.

"It were well to pray to the gods," declared Neram, as he murmured incantations to his favorite deity.

"Azra has spoken," cackled the witch woman shrilly. "He has told Sobrinini that the end of the journey draws near. It comes on four feet, on eight feet, on twelve feet."

"Sobrinini has spoken foolish words," said Bomba sternly, for he dreaded the effect of these wild vaporings on the superstitions of his followers. "Words that are empty and have no meaning. Sobrinini must eat now. Then she shall lie down and rest till the heat of the sun is past."

Her wild frenzy over, the woman submitted meekly enough, and the party sat down to the meal of turtles' eggs and cured meat that Gibo and Neram had prepared.

A striking figure was that of Bomba, the jungle

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boy, one that would have attracted instant attention in any company.

Though barely more than fifteen, he was tall and stalwart, symmetrical and clean cut. Powerful, panther-like muscles glided back and forth beneath the smooth skin that was as brown as any Indian's, bronzed by wind and sun.

But any suggestion that he might be a native of the jungle was negatived at once by a glance at his face, as handsome as that of a Greek god and clearly betokening his white blood. His features were finely chiseled, his nose aquiline, his mouth beautifully molded, his jaw strong and determined. His hair was brown and wavy, and his eyes, of the same color, were candid and wholly fearless.

He wore the short tunic of the natives and an animal skin across his breast, the skin of Geluk, the puma, that Bomba had slain when it was attacking his friends, Kiki and Woowoo, the parrots. His arms and legs were bare and his feet were clad in native sandals.

In all that vast jungle there were no eyes so keen, no feet so swift, no aim so sure, no mind so quick, no heart so courageous as those of Bomba, the jungle boy.

There was a slight frown on his brow as he stole a glance once again at Sobrinini sitting across from him. Her recent outburst had pained and disconcerted him. He had based high hopes on

the period of sanity that had been hers since the beginning of this journey. Now she had relapsed again, for a time at least, into her demented state.

This fondling of the lock of hair as a snake! This wild talk of the journey's end coming on four feet, eight feet, twelve feet!

Would she ever regain her senses sufficiently to tell Bomba what he longed so desperately to know? For somewhere in her disordered mind and memory was knowledge that Bomba could get from nowhere else on earth. If the witch woman failed him, he was indeed bereft.

There was a flutter and a shrill chattering in the branches above them, and a parrot of gay plumage flew down on the shoulder of the jungle boy.

"Kiki," cried Bomba in surprise and delight, for he recognized his feathered visitor. "Kiki has come to see Bomba and Bomba's heart is glad."

He smoothed the feathers as the parrot nestled confidingly to him and nipped affectionately at his ear. Then it made odd noises, to which the jungle boy listened attentively.

"So Woowoo is coming, too," replied Bomba to the bird's remarks, while the listeners to this strange colloquy looked on with eyes that bulged. "That is good. It seemed strange to Bomba that Kiki and Woowoo should ever be far apart."

The branches parted, and another parrot flut-

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tered down and took up its perch on the jungle boy's other shoulder.

"It is good that you have come, Woowoo," Bomba greeted the newcomer, caressing him. "Kiki told Bomba that Woowoo was on the way to meet his good friend."

"It is witchcraft," muttered Neram fearfully.

"Not so," denied Gibo, who was more familiar with his master's habits and had before witnessed the almost miraculous understanding of birds and animals that Bomba had acquired through his long lonely years in the jungle. "Bomba speaks and the birds hear and answer. There is none like Bomba."

For a little while the eerie conversation lasted. Then Bomba gently removed the parrots from their perches and with a parting caress dismissed them.

"Kiki and Woowoo must seek the trees again," he said, "for Bomba is going on a long journey and he has much that weighs on his heart. It may be many weeks before Bomba comes this way again. But he will not forget his good friends, Kiki and Woowoo, and he will look for them again when he returns."

With shrill chatterings of farewell the parrots rose reluctantly and were lost in the thick foliage of the trees.

Bomba looked after them until they had van-

ished from sight. Then his eyes fell. As they fell, they caught sight through an opening between the trees of something that caused him to stiffen to attention.

A tapir was grazing at a river bank several hundred feet away. The wind was blowing toward the travelers, so that the beast had not caught the human scent. It browsed lazily on the grass that grew thickly near the bank, wholly unknowing of danger.

"Gibo," commanded the jungle boy in a low voice, "give Bomba his bow and arrow."

The natives had followed Bomba's glance and caught sight of the tapir, its brown hide shining in the sun.

Gibo obeyed his master's command and Bomba fitted an arrow to the string.

"But, Master," interposed Neram timidly, "it is too far. The arrow will not reach."

"Be silent, foolish one," chided Gibo. "Neram knows not the keenness of Bomba's eye nor the strength of Bomba's arm."

The jungle boy crept cautiously to the edge of the wooded space.

Standing in the shadow of the last trees, he raised his bow, drew the arrow back to the head, and waited.

The beast had turned in such a way that its heart no longer presented a target, and it was in

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the heart that the arrow must lodge. If merely wounded, the brute would plunge into the river and creep along its bed under water until it had got beyond the reach of its pursuers.

For minutes that seemed hours to the breathless watchers, Bomba waited, as rigid as a statue, not a muscle quivering.

At last the beast turned.

Twang! The arrow sped on its way, singing its song of death. The tapir gave a convulsive spring, fell over on its side, and lay still.

A gleeful shout rose from Gibo and Neram and a shrill cackling from Sobrinini. Bomba turned away carelessly and threw his bow down on the turf.

"Let Gibo and Neram go and bring the tapir here," he directed. "There will be much fresh meat for the journey."

"Said I not, oh, foolish one, that there is none in the jungle like Bomba?" crowed Gibo to Neram, as the pair rushed over the open space to where the tapir was lying.

"He is under the favor of the gods," admitted Neram. "They have anointed his eyes and made them sharp. They have breathed on his arms and made them strong."

Bomba found Sobrinini regarding him with eyes in which admiration and foreboding struggled for mastery.

"It is well that Bomba can make the arrows sing the song of death," she murmured, "for Sobrinini sees that before long he must shoot hard and straight at enemies more deadly than the tapir."

"What kind of enemies?" queried Bomba, with a smile. "There is no wild beast of the jungle with which Bomba has not fought many times."

"Teeth and claws, teeth and claws," muttered the witch woman. "They are sharp and cruel. And they tear—tear till the flesh is sundered from the bones."

"Let us not talk of these," urged the jungle boy. "Bomba will know how to deal with them if they come. Bomba would rather hear what Sobrinini alone can tell. Let Sobrinini unlock the door of her mind and tell Bomba of his father and mother. Who are they? Where are they? Bomba's heart is sore because he does not know these things."

"Father? Mother?" repeated the witch woman vaguely. "It is long since Sobrinini has seen them, and she cannot remember. If she had Azra, the wise snake, here it might be that he could tell her." She seemed to be cudgeling her memory. "Bartow. Laura—"

"Yes, Bartow and Laura," cried Bomba eagerly. "Those are the names that Bomba has heard Casson speak when he has been babbling

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in his sleep. Where are they? Do they still live? Why is it that they left Bomba in the jungle?"

"Sobrinini's head is tired," was the reply. "Let Bomba ask Casson what he wants to know. Or Jojasta, the medicine man of the Moving Mountain. Or Japazy, the king of Jaguar Island. They will know the things that Sobrinini forgets."

"But Jojasta is dead!" cried Bomba. "A falling pillar of his temple killed him. And Japazy, too, is dead. These eyes of Bomba saw him go whirling down the side of a precipice. As for Casson, a veil is over his mind and he speaks words that have no meaning."

They were interrupted by Gibo and Neram, who came dragging the body of the tapir in triumph.

"The arrow, Master!" exclaimed Gibo, as he handed the missile over to Bomba. "It had pierced the tapir's heart. The lightning of the gods could not have struck more truly."

Bomba wiped the arrow carefully on the turf and restored it to his quiver.

"Here is much meat for many days," exulted Neram, as he looked at the body of the animal, the flesh of which was highly prized by the natives.

"Let Neram and Gibo cut out only the best

parts," directed Bomba. "It is not well to have too much to carry on the trail."

The servants set to work with their knives, skinning and cutting up the tapir.

Suddenly a wild shriek came from Sobrinini.

"A jaguar!" she screamed.

"Three of them!" shouted Gibo, as he made a dive for his weapons.

Bomba whirled about, his hand on his knife.

Not twenty feet away were three huge jaguars, crouched for a spring.

CHAPTER II

A DESPERATE BATTLE

THE scent of the tapir's blood had no doubt drawn the three savage monsters to the outskirts of Bomba's camp. There the heavy brush had shielded their movements until they had come within striking distance.

Now they crouched low on the ground, their greenish-yellow eyes like balls of fire, their tails switching menacingly from side to side, horrid growls issuing from their throats, every muscle tense for the spring.

Like lightning, Bomba drew from his belt his machete, a murderous knife nearly a foot long and ground to a razor edge. He grasped it by the tip of the blade and sent it hurtling through the air just as one of the jaguars sprang at him.

The whirling knife caught the brute while it was still in the air and sank to the haft in the jaguar's throat.

At the instant of throwing, Bomba leaped aside. The impetus of the spring carried the yellow and black body to the spot where the jungle boy had been standing a moment before.

But the brute had received its death blow. It rolled over and over in frightful convulsions, tearing at the knife embedded in its throat.

The other beasts sprang at the same moment as their comrade, but selected other victims.

Neram seized a spear and Gibo his club. The former hurled the spear as one of the brutes launched itself against him.

The spear grazed the jaguar's hide, but did not check the animal in the least. The next instant the beast had borne Neram to the ground and was tearing at his arm with its teeth.

Gibo raised his club and brought it down with terrific force on the brute's head. It stunned the jaguar and made it lose its hold of Neram's arm. Before it could recover, a rain of blows from the heavy club crushed its skull.

The third jaguar leaped at Sobrinini, and the frail form of the witch woman went down under the impact.

The brute crouched on her prostrate body, but before its fangs could seek her throat a loud yell from Bomba attracted its attention and caused it to raise its great head in snarling defiance.

The jungle boy had snatched up his bow and had swiftly fitted an arrow to the string. Then he had leaped in front of the jaguar and drawn the arrow to its head.

His yell had accomplished its purpose. The

uplifted head and open jaws gave Bomba the target he desired.

While the quick eye of the jungle boy seeks a vital spot, it may be well, for the benefit of those who have not read the preceding volumes of this series, to tell who Bomba was and what had been his adventures up to the time this story opens.

Bomba had never known his father or mother. From as far back as he could remember he had lived in the depths of the Amazonian jungle, his only companion a frail, white-haired naturalist named Cody Casson.

The old man was kind to Bomba, but he was moody and absorbed, and often passed days at a time without speaking except in monosyllables.

Under conditions that made for strength and hardihood, Bomba grew into boyhood. There were Indians about, friendly for the most part, but they rather avoided Casson's cabin, as they thought the queer white man was capable of weaving evil spells.

At fourteen Bomba was stronger than most grown men. His muscles were like steel, his eyes like those of a hawk, his body capable of enduring any fatigue. He had learned to use the bow and arrow with unerring skill. He could hurl a knife that found its target at any distance under fifty yards.

As Casson grew more feeble, Bomba naturally

slipped into the position of provider for himself and Casson. In his hunting trips he came frequently into combat with the wild beasts and terrible reptiles of the jungle and learned to match their cunning with his own.

Casson at times roused himself from his brooding and tried to give the boy the rudiments of an education in English. But this training came abruptly to an end when one day Casson and Bomba came across a giant anaconda. The reptile was advancing to attack Bomba when Casson fired and the rusty gun exploded, knocking Casson senseless and wounding the anaconda, which retreated.

Bomba dragged Casson back to the cabin and nursed him back to physical health. But the old man's memory was almost entirely gone, and from that time he was half-demented.

Bomba had frequently begged the old man to tell him of his parents, and Casson had promised to do so when the lad grew older. But after the accident Casson could not tell him, though he often tried. But just when he seemed on the verge of a revelation his memory would fail him. All that Bomba really learned was that his father's name was Bartow and his mother's name was Laura. All else remained in mystery.

How Bomba came in contact with two white men, rubber hunters, Dorn and Gillis; the adroit-

ness and courage with which he saved them when their camp was attacked by wild beasts; the thrilling encounters he had with savage beasts and poisonous snakes and huge boa constrictors and with the head-hunters, still more to be dreaded, who besieged him and Casson in their cabin, are told in the first book of this series, entitled: "Bomba the Jungle Boy; or, The Old Naturalist's Secret."

Following the defeat of the head-hunters, Bomba gathered from Casson, in one of the latter's lucid intervals, that Jojasta, the Medicine Man of the Moving Mountain, held the secret of the lad's birth. Bomba set out on his quest, encountering terrible dangers in his journey to the Moving Mountain, only to find Jojasta breathing his last. The medicine man had only strength to tell him he could get the knowledge that was more than life to him from Sobrinini, the witch woman, who dwelt beyond the Giant Cataract.

Bitterly disappointed, Bomba journeyed to the abode of the witch woman, undeterred by the terrifying things that were told him about the hag-like creature and her Island of Snakes. He overcame perils that might have daunted the stoutest heart and at last found Sobrinini in the midst of a horrid festival in which her hideous snakes played a grisly part. Sobrinini had once been a famous opera singer, who had fled from

civilization and was now insane. Bomba got very little from her of what he was sure she knew, but her disjointed speech did confirm his conviction that his father was named Bartow and his mother Laura. On the witch woman's island he saw a picture of a beautiful woman whom he believed to be his mother.

Some words that Sobrinini let fall convinced Bomba that some knowledge of his parents might be secured from the half-breed Japazy, the ruler of Jaguar Island, a place so named because of its being frequented by those ferocious beasts.

Japazy was absent on an expedition when Bomba reached the island. The inhabitants sought to sacrifice the lad to their gods, but by the exercise of great craft and daring Bomba managed to escape just before the island was submerged by a flood.

From the rushing waters, Bomba rescued a native, Gibo, who from that time on was devoted to his rescuer. He followed his master unshrinkingly into any combat with beasts or men. Together the pair visited the Abandoned City, where they fell into the cruel clutches of Japazy.

From that time on, adventures crowded thick and fast on the jungle boy. He was captured by cannibals as he pursued his quest on Terror Trail; he faced death a score of times in a campaign against the fierce Abaragos, whose god was the

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sacred crocodile; he had gruesome experiences in the Valley of the Skulls.

What dangers he encountered in that grisly region as he led a band in an attempt to rescue the kidnaped child of the friendly Hondura; his battle of wits and weapons with the crafty and cruel Mendoza, tyrant of the region; the singular way in which he checkmated his enemy and returned in triumph are narrated in the preceding volume of this series, entitled: "Bomba, the Jungle Boy, among the Slaves."

Now to return to Bomba as he faces the savage jaguar, knowing that life or death depended upon his quickness and courage.

As the brute upreared from the prostrate body of the witch woman, Bomba shot.

The arrow entered the eye of the jaguar and penetrated to the brain. With a hideous roar, the beast rolled over, stricken to the death. A few convulsive movements and the great body straightened out, motionless.

Throwing aside his bow, Bomba rushed to the aid of Sobrinini. She was unconscious and looked as though she were dead. But Bomba's hand sought her heart and found that it was still beating, though very faintly.

He ran to the river near which the tapir had been grazing and brought back water. With this

he bathed her face and wrists and forced a little between her lips.

Still the unconsciousness persisted and promised to be of long duration. She had not been clawed or torn by the creature, but the tremendous impact of its body had almost cut the thread of life.

Bomba made her a soft bed of grass and leaves and placed her gently upon it. Then he went over to where Gibo was ministering to his wounded comrade, Neram.

The latter's arm had been badly mangled, and Bomba, skilled in the rude medical lore of the jungle, examined it with concern. He made a concoction of some of the herbs he carried in his pouch, bathed the wounds carefully, and applied a soothing poultice.

Neram, although every touch gave him exquisite pain, bore the treatment with true Indian stolidity and even managed to conjure up a faint smile.

"It is Neram's own fault," he said. "If his spear had gone straight, the jaguar would not have reached him."

"Neram is brave," replied Bomba. "He looked into the eyes of death and did not flinch. But it will be a long time before he can handle the bow and spear. Still, it is well that the jaguar's teeth found Neram's arm instead of Neram's throat."

He left the faithful fellow in Gibo's care and returned to Sobrinini.

The sudden onslaught of the jaguars left Bomba deeply perturbed. It threatened to derange all his plans for the expedition on which he had set out with such high hopes.

The injury to Neram robbed him at a stroke of a third of his fighting force. The Indian was tried and true and absolutely devoted to his master. Bomba had rescued him when a slave from the torments of a cruel tyrant, and from that time on Neram would have followed his idol through fire and water.

A more severe blow to Bomba, however, was the probable result to Sobrinini of the brute's attack. At the best, her hold on life was slender, and this terrific shock might well prove fatal.

Yet it was upon her help and knowledge that the success of the expedition depended.

In one of her lucid hours she had told Bomba of the existence of a certain steel chest that had been buried by her years before on the banks of the Underground River. This chest contained articles and documents that would be of immense aid to Bomba in establishing facts relating to his parentage.

What these facts were, the jungle boy had urgently pressed the witch woman to tell him.

But she had subsided again into her ravings, and the golden opportunity had passed.

At other moments, when her mind was clear, she had given him additional bits of information as to the location of the Underground River. But it was in a part of the jungle into which Bomba had never penetrated, and he could get only a general idea of its direction. It had been Sobrinini's own proposal that they should go together to the place which she expressed herself certain of finding. This offer had been eagerly grasped by Bomba.

He had left Casson in the care of the faithful squaw, Pipina, in the maloca of the friendly chief, Hondura, had prepared weapons and provisions, and, accompanied by Gibo and Neram, both of whom he trusted utterly, had set out on the journey.

That journey had now endured for four days, and despite Sobrinini's feeble condition they had made marked progress toward their goal. Much of the time the witch woman had been carried on a rude litter by Gibo and Neram. Bomba had reason to believe that a very few days more would find them in the vicinity of the Underground River.

Now, at a blow, his plans were upset. He and Gibo had two invalids on their hands. It might be even worse than that. Suppose that Sobrinini

should die, carrying with her the knowledge for which Bomba could look to no one else!

For nearly two hours the jungle boy sat by the witch woman's side, engrossed in his gloomy thoughts. Then Sobrinini's eyes opened, opened very slowly. She looked about her vaguely. Then a shudder ran through her and a scream came from her lips.

"The jaguar!" she screamed and waved her hands as though fighting the beast away.

"The jaguar is dead," said Bomba soothingly. "Let Sobrinini's mind be at peace."

"And the others!" cried Sobrinini, looking fearfully about.

"All dead," replied Bomba. "They will trouble us no more."

The witch woman sank back pacified. Then a faint smile of satisfaction came on her withered face.

"Did not Sobrinini say," she murmured, "that the end of the journey was coming on four feet, eight feet, twelve feet?"

CHAPTER III

A THRILLING SPECTACLE

AT Sobrinini's words, Bomba started violently and looked at the witch woman with a touch of awe.

Twelve feet! The three jaguars!

Did she then have second sight? He recalled other occasions when her predictions had been fulfilled with uncanny accuracy. Perhaps it was not for nothing that she had been called the witch woman.

Sobrinini read what was passing in his mind, and her smile deepened.

"Bomba would not believe that Sobrinini knew," she said. "The journey's end has come."

"Not so," replied Bomba, with a heartiness that he was very far from feeling. "There are many days before we reach the end of the journey."

"The journey's end has come," repeated Sobrinini solemnly. "It has come for Sobrinini. I feel it here," and she placed her thin hand on her heart.

"That is because Sobrinini is tired," affirmed

the jungle boy. "It is the shock from the jaguar's body. But she has lost no blood. She has not a scratch. Sobrinini will sleep, and when she awakes she will be refreshed."

"Yes, Sobrinini will sleep," was the reply. "But from that sleep there will be no waking. Sobrinini will find in death the peace that has been denied her in life."

A chill ran through Bomba's veins as he realized that the prediction would probably prove true. He had seen death in the jungle too often not to know the signs of its approach.

These were evident in Sobrinini's face. It had the gray pallor of those upon whom death had put its seal. Too, there was a certain spiritual quality shining through the features, as though the earthly elements of the body had grown so thin that the soul was almost visible.

Yes, Sobrinini was near the journey's end!

The demented look had largely disappeared from the eyes, although a fugitive glimpse of it could still at times be seen. Sobrinini was not wholly sane, but she was nearer sanity than she had been at any time since Bomba had taken her from the Island of Snakes.

"Bomba has something on his mind," murmured Sobrinini. The voice was calm, the eyes intelligent. "Let Bomba speak, for the time is short."

"Tell me then of my parents," urged Bomba,

in a voice that was husky with emotion. "Who were they? Where are they? Are they still alive? Where can I find them?"

"Your parents," murmured the witch woman. "Ah, yes, I knew them well. But that was so long ago, so long ago. Yes, I have seen them holding you in their arms. I have heard your mother crooning over you, bending over you as you lay in your cradle. She called you Bonny. You were her only child, her treasure. In looks, you are very like your father."

"And he was Bartow?" broke in Bomba. "That is the name that Casson spoke. And you thought I was Bartow when you first saw me on the Island of Snakes."

The reference was unfortunate.

"My snakes!" cried the witch woman. "The only things that ever loved Sobrinini. And Azra, the wisest one of all! Where is Azra? Bring him to me."

"Yes, yes," said Bomba soothingly. "But we were speaking of my father, Bartow."

"Bartow was a great man," said Sobrinini dreamily. "A painter. A handsome man, as you are handsome, Bomba. His pictures were known all over Europe and America. Yes, a great man. He painted a picture of your mother. But Japazy stole it."

"I have it here!" exclaimed Bomba, reaching

beneath his puma skin and bringing out a little roll of canvas in a waterproof case. "I found it in the dwelling of Japazy on Jaguar Island and I brought it away with me when the earthquake came. I have carried it with me ever since. Tell me if this is a picture of my mother."

With hands that trembled he unrolled the canvas and held it before Sobrinini.

Her eyes lighted as she gazed upon it.

"Yes," she said, "that is your mother, Laura. She was lovely, as you see, so lovely that men caught their breath at sight of her. And as good as she was beautiful. And her voice—oh, it was golden, golden! It stole away the hearts of her listeners."

"She was a singer, then?" asked Bomba.

"In grand opera," replied Sobrinini. "She sang in New York and in all the capitals of Europe. She sang with me. For many years we were in the same company. Oh, those days, those long past days!"

She hummed under her breath a few bars from a melody of Lucia.

"They were in America and in Europe, Sobrinini says," interrupted Bomba. "How is it, then, that Bomba is here?"

The witch woman brought herself back with a visible effort.

"It was because of a bad man, a man with a

black heart," she muttered. "But Sobrinini's head is getting tired. She cannot remember the name."

"Was it Japazy?" Bomba prompted.

Sobrinini clutched at the name.

"Japazy!" she repeated. "Yes, it was Japazy. A wicked man! He ought to be killed."

"He has been killed," said the jungle boy. "Bomba saw him die."

"It is well," was the reply. "He was the snake in Eden. The bad snake. Not like Azra. Azra is good and wise."

"Yes," said Bomba, dreading to have her return to her vagaries. "But this Japazy. What did he do?"

"He fell in love with your mother," replied Sobrinini. "He tried to get her to run away with him. But she hated and despised him and told your father. Your father sought him out. There was a quarrel. I think they fought a duel, but I am not sure, for my head is tired. Tired!" Her voice died away in a whisper.

For a few minutes neither of them spoke. Bomba was frantic for further revelations, but he did not want to tax her strength too far. He brought her some water to drink, bathed her brow, and she seemed refreshed.

"After the duel," he ventured gently at last, "what did Japazy do?"

"He was wounded," replied Sobrinini, "and

when he got well he came to South America. We thought we should never see him again. But later the opera company went to Buenos Aires and to Rio de Janeiro to fill engagements. It was there we met Casson."

"You mean Japazy," suggested Bomba.

"No, Cody Casson," replied Sobrinini. "He was a great naturalist. He and Bartow became warm friends. It was later that Japazy, that man of evil, crossed our path once more."

That man of evil! He was all of that, Bomba thought, as he recalled the fiendish tortures that Japazy had visited on his subjects and had planned to inflict upon himself and Gibo.

"There was poison in Japazy's veins," went on Sorbinini, after a pause, "a poison as deadly as that of the jararaca. He plotted for revenge. He knew that Bartow and Laura would be stabbed to the heart if they lost their child. So he lay in wait and stole it."

"Stole me?" exclaimed Bomba, his horror of the villain deepening. "Japazy stole me?"

"Yes," replied Sobrinini. "He tore you from the arms of your nurse and made off into the jungle. He was a cunning fox and he knew how to cover his tracks. Your mother almost died of grief."

"Poor Laura!" murmured Bomba. He could

see the eyes of the lovely original of his cherished picture suffused with tears.

"Your father, too, was distracted," continued the witch woman. "He offered great rewards. He put the police to work. But never a word did they hear of Japazy and Bomba. It was as though they had vanished from the earth."

She had been speaking with unusual clearness and animation, but now her strength was becoming exhausted. She closed her eyes wearily.

It was maddening to have her stop now, when she seemed right on the verge of a momentous revelation. Bomba had already learned much. Many of the mysteries that had tantalized him for years had been cleared up. But the most important fact of all, the present whereabouts of his parents, if they were still alive, was still unknown to him.

Were they doomed to remain forever unknown? Would those faded eyes ever reopen, that weak voice take up its story?

In a perfect agony of apprehension he waited, stilling, by the stern self-restraint he had learned in the hard school of the jungle, his clamorous desire to urge the woman to proceed with her story.

Sobrinini's eyes opened. Bomba noted with alarm that the expression in them was vaguer and

wilder than before. Her dementia was coming on again.

"Azra! Where is Azra?" she murmured fretfully.

"It was of Japazy we were speaking," Bomba reminded her gently. "Japazy and Bomba. Japazy stole Bomba and carried him into the jungle. But he must have lost him there, for Bomba has lived many years with Casson."

"Casson," murmured Sobrinini. "I told you that Casson took Bomba away from Japazy."

"No," replied Bomba. "Sobrinini's thought was faster than her words. It was Casson that took Bomba from Japazy?" he prompted.

"Yes," replied the witch woman. "Casson was a naturalist, and one day when he was deep in the jungle he saw Japazy, but Japazy did not see him. Casson followed Japazy to the cabin where he had hidden Bomba. Then Casson struck Japazy so that his senses left him. Casson took Bomba and went still deeper into the jungle. So far did he penetrate that at last he could not find his way out. There was war then between the tribes for many years, and the jungle was full of blood and death. So Casson feared for Bomba's life and did not dare try to find his people. And he waited—and waited—and—" the tired voice died away.

"Tell me this, Sobrinini," urged Bomba fran-

tically. "Where are my father and my mother? Do they still live?"

"They live," said Sobrinini.

"How does Sobrinini know?" asked the lad.

"Sobrinini does not know," was the unexpected reply.

"But Sobrinini said she did know!" exclaimed the bewildered lad.

"Sobrinini does not know with the mind, but she knows with the spirit," was the reply. "She has seen them in her dreams. She sees them now!" she cried, her voice rising to a shriek, in which amazement and joy were equally mingled. "There is Laura now! She is singing! Wait, Laura, Sobrinini will sing with you!"

With an energy that would have been unimaginable a moment before, she threw aside the grass blanket that Bomba had laid over her, sprang to her feet, and began to sing.

Bomba shrank back, awed, and the Indians looked at the demented woman with affright and murmured incantations to their gods.

Song after song poured from her pallid lips, arias from the earlier of the great Italian operas, from Lucia and Trovatore and Rigoletto and a host of other glorious melodies that have stirred the hearts of the world.

Her voice was shrill and cracked, but there were strains in which much of her oldtime beauty

of voice was evident, strains that explained the reputation she had borne of being one of the greatest sopranos that the world had seen.

At times, after finishing an aria, she bowed repeatedly again and again to the fancied applause of the multitude, and reached out her arms to take the invisible bouquets that were being brought to the stage.

It was fantastic, pitiful, wonderful, incredible!

The performance finished at last, Sobrinini turned to Bomba, her wrinkled face wreathed in smiles.

"What a wonderful house we have had to-night, Bartow!" she said exultantly. "Such an audience! The house packed to the roof! And such applause! The king himself was clapping his hands. And these flowers, these beautiful flowers!" extending her empty arms. "Ah, now you know, Bomba," she added quietly after a moment's pause, "how Sobrinini could sing before the injustice of the world caused her to flee to the Island of Snakes."

She tottered, and would have fallen had not Bomba caught her in his arms.

CHAPTER IV

THE CURTAIN FALLS

HIS heart a tumult of confused emotions, Bomba laid the frail form tenderly on the couch.

That last wild outflare of the departing spirit had exhausted Sobrinini. The death dew lay damp on her brow. Her fading eyes were glazed.

"The end of the journey!" she murmured softly. "But a glorious end. Now the curtain has been rung down. The opera house is emptying. The people are going out into the night. And the night is dark and cold. There are no stars. I must hurry to my dressing room. Call my carriage, Bomba. I do not like to be kept waiting."

"Sobrinini will not be kept waiting long," said the jungle boy gently.

"And then to sleep," went on Sobrinini dreamily. "Oh, it will be good to sleep, to sleep for a long, long time. Sobrinini is tired."

Bomba could not trust himself to speak. He sat there, gently smoothing the pale forehead that was growing chilly under his touch.

She lay there, breathing so softly that it scarcely seemed she breathed at all.

Her lips moved. Bomba bent down to catch her whisper.

"Music!" she murmured. "I hear it. Such glorious music!"

And on that note—she died!

Bomba gently closed Sobrinini's eyes and folded her hands over her breast. He was deeply shaken with emotion.

Such a stormy life, caught in a whirl of forces too strong for her, the poor woman had lived! And now she had entered into peace. For her sake Bomba could not wish her back. But for his own he wished ardently that she still lived.

In a few minutes that her mind was clear he had learned more about what he wanted to know concerning his parents than he had in all his years of jungle life.

Much that had been tangled had been unraveled. Many of his questions had been answered. Instead of scattered bits of knowledge that seemed unrelated, he now had a consecutive story of the events that had led to his being in the jungle with Casson.

But all this concerned the past. What he was frantic to know related to the present. Where were his parents? Did they live?

Sobrinini had said that they were still alive.

Yet almost in the same breath she had confessed that she did not know. She had seen them—but in dreams!

Almost at the moment of death she had “seen” Laura, “heard” her singing!

Yet, even this—fantastic as it seemed—was something. With any one else than Sobrinini, it would perhaps have meant nothing. But Sobrinini was different. She seemed to have an uncanny gift of second sight. Her prediction that the end of the journey was coming on twelve feet! Pure nonsense, apparently. Yet it had come in precisely the way she had predicted. Was this only a coincidence?

At any rate, Bomba drew from it what comfort he could.

Another fact revealed by Sobrinini might also help him in his search.

His parents were famous people. His father was a noted painter. His mother was a celebrated singer. If he ever reached civilization, it would be far easier to trace them than if they were humble and unknown.

Bomba rose with a sigh and went over to Gibo and Neram.

The natives felt no regret at the passing of the witch woman. They had always been afraid of her, fearful that she would cast some spell upon them. During the journey they had kept as far

away from her as they could. And that last eerie outburst had frightened them almost out of their wits. They were frankly relieved that she was dead.

Bomba again examined Neram's wounded arm.

"It were well if Neram were in the maloca of Hondura," declared the jungle boy. "The medicine men of the tribe are more skilled than Bomba in treating the wounds made by wild beasts. Neram could rest there till his arm was well."

"Neram does not want to leave his master," objected the Indian.

"Nor does Bomba want to lose Neram," was the reply. "But it is for Neram's good. It is a hard journey that lies before Bomba, too hard for Neram to share. It is better for Neram to return to Hondura's tribe and wait for Bomba's return. Neram will tell Hondura and Casson that Sobrinini is dead and that Bomba and Gibo are going to search for the Underground River of which Sobrinini had spoken. If Bomba does not return before three moons, they will know that he is in the place of the dead."

"Neram will do as the master says," replied the native submissively.

"Neram will take meat enough for his journey," went on Bomba. "Neram's mind is cunning and he is skilled in the ways of the jungle. In two days he will be in the maloca of Hondura."

An hour later Neram had set out on his return journey.

Bomba turned to the faithful Gibo.

"Things have changed, Gibo," he said sadly. "Sobrinini is dead. Neram has gone. This morning we were four. Now we are two."

"The master speaks truly," replied the Indian. "Yet Gibo cares not so long as he is with Bomba. He has followed Bomba in many dangers. He will follow him till death."

"Gibo has a good heart," replied the lad. "Now we will make a place in the earth for Sobrinini."

They found some pieces of flint and dug a deep hole in a pleasant spot beneath the shadow of the trees. With their rude implements it was an arduous task, but at last it was finished.

"It is well," pronounced Bomba, as he straightened up. "It is deep enough for the last bed of the woman with the voice of gold. It seems to Bomba that he can still hear its echoes among the trees, Gibo."

The native shuddered and raised both dark hands heavenward, as though to avert a spirit of evil.

"Sobrinini was mad, Master," he muttered. "She sang and danced like the child of the Evil One. A witch, Master. She is dead. That is good."

Bomba shook his head and continued to stare absently into the empty grave.

"Bomba does not think that, Gibo. He is sorry that she is dead. She knew my mother."

It was vain for him to try to express in words the heaviness of heart that weighed upon him.

One part of him still thrilled to those golden notes of Sobrinini's, those exquisite arias that appealed to the artistic temperament he had inherited from both father and mother and filled him with a strange enchantment.

It had been a wonderful experience. In that brief hour before her death, time had been rolled back for Sobrinini. The years with their tragic burden of misery and disillusion had vanished. For that breathless interval Bomba had gazed upon a transformed Sobrinini, the Sobrinini who had once stood on the stages of the great capitals of the world and poured out her golden gift gladly for the delight of an adoring public.

Bomba could not describe what he felt, but he sensed instinctively that never at the height of her career had Sobrinini lived through a moment of greater triumph than that at which she had met Death face to face and for a brief, an awful, a glorious period held him at bay.

Sobrinini was mortal, as her still body lying there testified. But the gift of song, the music she had held in her soul, was immortal. Though

expressed by other throats and lips, it would live forever.

None of this the jungle boy could have put into words, but he felt it deeply in his heart, and for him the jungle was full of golden sounds, the notes of Sobrinini's last songs, muted, soft-flowing, and eternal.

Out of the heart of a fallen tree trunk, Bomba and Gibo dug a coffin for Sobrinini. Into this hollowed log they laid her, covering her form with flowers.

The face of the dead was peaceful and content as Bomba had never seen it in life. The wrinkles, the lines of pain and hate and madness had been magically erased. The face of the witch, the snake woman, was almost young.

Bomba, looking down upon her, thought:

"She has seen my mother. She has spoken to her. She has touched her. Because of that she is sacred to me."

He stretched his hand over the rude coffin and said slowly in a solemn voice:

"Go with the Great Spirit, Sobrinini, oh, singer of the beautiful voice. It is the wish of Bomba that you find in death what you have not found in life."

He stooped to one end of the hollowed log and motioned Gibo to take the other.

Reverently, they lowered their burden into the

hole they had dug. Over the top of the coffin Bomba dropped a slab of bark that hid the dead from mortal sight forever.

Then followed the soft thud of earth on wood. The grave was filled in and smoothed over on the top. Then the twain piled heavy rocks upon the spot to prevent wild beasts from trying to dig up the body.

Bomba stood there for a moment, when the task was completed, in silent contemplation. Then he turned swiftly to Gibo.

"We must go now, Gibo. We start at once."

Gibo bowed his head in assent.

"The word of Bomba is the law of Gibo," he said simply.

Together they plunged into the jungle.

The afternoon sun was hot. The air was heavy and wet, so that Bomba and Gibo panted as they pushed their way through the brushwood and the thick, snake-like vines that depended from the trees.

The heart of the jungle boy was heavy within him. The high hopes with which he had started on his mission were dimmed.

The death of Sobrinini had made his adventure far more difficult, far more perilous.

To be sure, the snake woman had described in vague and disjointed terms the path that he must follow to reach the Underground River. She had

even drawn for him a rough map, made with a piece of flint and with blood pricked from her own veins.

But the map was rude and incomplete. It supplied him with a rough outline, but without the details that Sobrinini could have furnished, had she lived.

All these things were in Bomba's mind as he cut his way through the jungle, followed by the faithful Gibo.

He paused at an intersection of two trails and was debating which to follow when a sharp cry came from Gibo.

"Master, beware! Draw back your hand!"

CHAPTER V

THE SERPENT STRIKES

AT Gibo's warning, Bomba started back. His keen eyes searched the jungle. Nothing moved. Nothing threatened. All things seemed at peace.

Bomba frowned.

"There is nothing, Gibo. Why did Gibo cry out?"

For answer Gibo pointed to a short, thick-leaved plant, growing close to Bomba's hand.

From the bright green stem of the plant grew heavy stalks, and at the end of each stalk bloomed an open bell-like flower of a gorgeous, flaunting red.

Beautiful it was to look upon, but as evil as any of those poisonous plants that make the jungle a place of terror and peril to the unwary traveler.

"The flower of blood," muttered Bomba. "Bomba was lost in thought, Gibo, or he, too, would have seen the danger."

He picked up a twig from the ground and extended it till it rested lightly upon the outer petals of one of the gorgeous red flowers. The petals moved swiftly, snapping shut upon the twig.

Bomba and Gibo both knew that within the bell-like bloom was a sticky amber paste, not unlike honey in substance and taste, but of a deadly poison.

In this death cup insects were caught and held to be devoured at leisure by the flower of blood, as it was known to the natives of the district.

That poison was death to human beings as well as to insects. Another moment, and Bomba's fingers would have been gripped and held by the spike-edged petals of the flower of blood.

"Gibo is the friend of Bomba," said the lad simply, and pushed on, avoiding the treacherous blooms and picking his way carefully through the myriad dangers that beset his path.

Good progress was made for the remainder of the day, and nightfall found the adventurers weary and ravenous, but well satisfied at the miles covered on the journey.

Gibo made a small fire of twigs, and in this they roasted some turtle eggs that they had discovered shortly before nightfall hidden under a rock on the edge of a stream.

They ate with a good appetite and afterward sat before the fire, neither speaking nor moving, Gibo retreating into his native stolidity, Bomba wrapped in somber thoughts.

The jungle boy felt very lonely. The death of Sobrinini had affected him more than he would

have thought possible. He felt that the one important link that had bound him to his parents had been broken.

"But I am foolish," he thought, shaking himself chidingly. "There is still Cody Casson."

Casson, if he were to believe the tale of Sobrinini, had once known his parents intimately. If it were possible for him to regain his memory, the old man could tell Bomba of many things essential for him to know.

But there was that mysterious door in Casson's mind that only opened a little way at times and then shut again tightly, imprisoning memories that would have meant so much to Bomba.

The jungle lad sighed and wondered if he would ever reach that mysterious Underground River, and if, once there, he would find that buried chest of which the demented woman had spoken.

The last flame of the feeble fire flickered and went out. Bomba stared moodily at the embers for a few moments, then turned to Gibo.

"We must sleep," he said. "To-morrow we travel far over unknown paths. We shall need our strength."

"Yes, Master," assented the native. "It is in Gibo's mind that, if all goes well, Bomba and Gibo will stand on the banks of the Underground River before the sun sinks to-morrow."

Bomba nodded. They forced their way into

the center of a great thorn thicket, through which no wild beast would venture to penetrate, and stretched themselves out upon the ground.

Bomba sank instantly into a deep sleep, deep and restful, yet one from which the jungle lad would wake instantly, alert and on the defensive, at the slightest sign of danger.

He woke before dawn, rousing Gibo from the lethargy of sleep with an urgent:

"Awake, Gibo. The rising sun must find us far on the way to the place we seek."

They made a hurried meal of some roasted flesh of the tapir, and started off on the last and most perilous part of their journey. Especially perilous, because this portion of the jungle was wholly unknown to the jungle boy.

There were hundreds of square miles of those vast Amazonian wastes that he knew as he knew the clearing about his own cabin. Many of these he had threaded on his various journeys to the Giant Cataract, the Island of Snakes, the Moving Mountain, the Abandoned City, Jaguar Island, the cannibal haunts of Gonibobo.

In all of these he knew sanctuaries, caves, hiding places, that had often been of priceless value when attacked by savage beasts and reptiles and still more savage men. But to the district he now was in he was a total stranger, and in consequence the dangers of the trail were multiplied.

46 BOMBA ON THE UNDERGROUND RIVER

By the time the sun was high in the heavens he and Gibo had traveled a long distance from the place where they had spent the night. But they were still a great way from their journey's end, and they were wearied from the battle that they had been compelled to wage against the wilderness.

Trails were few and far distant one from another, and when one could be discerned it was hard to follow. Roots reached out to trip them up. Creepers from the trees wound themselves about throat and body. They had to cut their way with machetes through the underbrush.

Sweat dripped from Bomba's bronzed body. His breath was labored as he pointed ahead to a faintly marked trail that would not have been discernible to eyes less keen than his.

"If we can believe this map of Sobrinini's, we are nearing the journey's end, Gibo," he said. "This path must mark the beginning of the Trail of Ghosts which is marked here. Bomba hopes that he will reach the end of it before the sun goes to sleep."

The native nodded.

"Gibo believes the master speaks truth," he responded. "But Gibo wishes that he knew this part of the jungle better. It is not like what he has seen before, nor is it a place of which any of the elders of the tribe have spoken."

Bomba opened his mouth to speak but stopped short. His eyes were fixed upon a wicked head that rose from a mass of rope-like coils!

"Do not move, Gibo," he murmured softly. "Stand as if dead."

Trained in the ways of the jungle, Gibo did as he was bidden. By not so much as the flicker of an eyelid did he betray the presence of life in his body.

Slowly and with infinite caution, Bomba raised his rifle. That magic and terrible instrument of death peculiar to the white man and known to the natives as the "fire stick" was ready for use. And it was in the hands of a master.

A wicked hiss came from the ugly triangular head.

Crack! The bullet sped on its way and shattered the head of the reptile. The creature fell to the ground, thrashing about terribly in the underbrush.

Bomba stepped forward. Suddenly, another head shot up, probably that of the reptile's mate, and two vicious, glassy eyes fixed themselves with a terrible glare upon the face of the jungle boy.

There was no time to fire. Bomba struck at the head with the butt of his rifle. But like a flash the creature dodged the blow that would have beaten its head to jelly.

Bomba slipped on the slimy jungle bottom just

as the snake, like lightning, threw itself into a coil again.

The lad regained his balance just as the reptile struck. But Bomba, too, was as quick as lightning.

He dodged the blow, and as the snake lay extended on the ground from the force of its missed blow, Bomba threw himself upon it and grasped it with both hands directly behind the head.

He knew now the reptile with which he had to deal. It was the coanaradi, the most deadly snake of the Brazilian jungle, one bite from whose fangs was certain death.

It was twelve feet in length and of tremendous muscular power.

Bomba's fingers sank deep into the slimy neck. The snake whipped its coils around the lad's body and struggled frantically to free its neck from those gripping hands. It twisted and writhed, its slavering jaws trying to reach the lad's face.

CHAPTER VI

A FEARFUL STRUGGLE

BOMBA held on to the slimy neck of the reptile with the strength of desperation.

Let his fingers slip a fraction of an inch from their hold, and those hideous fangs would be imbedded in his flesh.

The horrid eyes looked into his only a few inches away. The coils clamped ever more tightly about his body, and it seemed as though they would crush his bones.

Gibo danced about, trying to get in a blow to save his master. But in that writhing, twisting combination of human and reptile body, he could not hurt the snake without hurting the jungle boy infinitely worse. If he struck at the snake's head, he might hit Bomba's hands and cause him to loosen his grasp, and if the snake's head were once freed, Bomba was doomed.

"Stand off, Gibo!" panted Bomba. "Gibo cannot help Bomba. He must make this fight alone."

Relentless as fate, the lad's fingers pressed still more deeply into the cooanaradi's throat.

That terrible pressure could not be long re-

sisted. The reptile's breath was shut off. Its strength and ferocity diminished as that strangling hold persisted.

A glaze stole over the eyes; the coils about the lad's body relaxed; and the reptile's head dropped, limp.

Still Bomba's fingers maintained their grip. He knew the vitality of the snakes and had seen too often a last flurry of ferocity when to all appearances they were dead.

"Bomba has conquered!" cried Gibo, in vast delight. "He has killed the cooanaradi with his bare hands. There is none like Bomba in all the jungle."

For full two minutes more, Bomba kept his hold. Then, when he was convinced that the last spark of life had fled, he threw the snake from him. It lay limp and motionless, but to make assurance doubly sure Bomba drew his machete and severed the snake's head from its body.

Then only did he draw a long breath. He was spent and panting from the terrible struggle, during all of which he had been within a hair's breadth of death.

And such a death! Bomba had seen men die from the bite of the cooanaradi. He looked with a shudder at the gaping jaws that grinned up at him and pushed the head of the snake aside from the path with his foot.

"Bomba is quick. Bomba is strong. Bomba is brave," chanted the Indian. "This is a story to tell to the people of my tribe. But they will not believe that Gibo is speaking true words. They will laugh at him. For never has it been known in the jungle that a man could kill the cooanaradi with his bare hands."

"Gibo knows it now," replied Bomba. "But may Gibo's gods forbid that Bomba will ever have to do it again. But come, Gibo. It is time we were once more on our journey."

They turned once more to the Trail of Ghosts, as it was marked on the map of Sobrinini, and pursued their way through the wilderness in a thoughtful mood.

To Gibo, full of superstitions, the attack of the great snake, coming as it had at the very moment they were about to set foot on the ominously named Trail of Ghosts that was to lead them eventually to the Underground River, seemed an omen of evil. He was far more impressed than Bomba, in whom the contempt of the educated white man for signs and portents instilled into him by Casson worked side by side with the superstitions that surrounded him in his jungle habitat.

The pair had not proceeded far along the faintly marked trail before Gibo voiced the presentiment of evil that had come to him.

"The snake was a bad sign, Master. It was sent to warn us of danger to come."

Bomba made no reply, but used his knife to hack at a growth of heavy, interlacing vines that blocked his path.

"The sign was sent to warn us to turn back while it was yet time," persisted Gibo.

"Gibo speaks words that are idle," declared Bomba, "such words as are spoken by children and the foolish. Signs are for minds that are weak. Even if the snake were a sign, it was a good one, for did not Bomba kill the snake? Would not that be a sign that Bomba and Gibo will kill other evil things they may meet?"

The argument seemed sound, and Gibo was silenced for the moment, if not convinced.

The vines gave way before Bomba's machete. He ripped them aside impatiently and peered ahead at the prospect presented to him.

It was forbidding enough. Rank weeds and gorgeous flowers, many of which he recognized as poisonous, sprang up everywhere, encroaching closely on the narrow, all but invisible path.

That path was slippery, overlaid with mud and slime, giving witness that they were approaching a swampy district. Moreover, the trail dipped sharply a short way ahead, a steep descent as far as the eye could follow it.

"It leads to the Underground River," muttered Bomba, and his brown eyes gleamed.

"It leads to peril and death, Master," murmured Gibo pessimistically.

Bomba glanced impatiently at his follower.

"Why does Gibo croak as the toad croaks?" he demanded. "Bomba and Gibo have faced peril before and still live."

Gibo continued to shake his head.

"The master may scoff at Gibo," he said, "but the cooanaradi was a sign that the Spirit of Evil walks abroad. From this time on there will be danger in every step."

Bomba smiled tolerantly, but was impressed in spite of himself by the earnest way in which the prophecy was delivered.

He looked about him and noted for the first time the dread stillness that had fallen like a heavy blanket over the jungle.

The usual chattering of parrots and monkeys in the branches over their heads was stilled. No sound of jungle beast reached their ears. The hum of insects had ceased. The trees stood motionless. The flowers that framed the trail stood stiffly on unwavering stalks.

The jungle, frightened into silence, seemed holding its breath—for what?

"The great wind," muttered Bomba, recognizing the deadly hush that precedes a hurricane.

"It is coming, Gibo. Every beast and flower in the jungle knows it. Every leaf of every tree waits and listens for it."

"Then turn back, Master!" cried Gibo earnestly. "In the great wind, as Bomba knows, is death."

Bomba shook his head.

"It is as bad to turn back as it is to go on," he said. "We have faced the great wind before and live to tell of it. Come, Gibo. We must try to find shelter before the storm sweeps down upon us."

With the words, Bomba plunged through the hole he had made in the interlacing vines and proceeded along the slippery trail at an easy, loping run.

Faithful Gibo followed, though his face was grave and he cast frightened looks about him at the faint light that spread over the jungle painting it a ghastly, unreal color.

Bomba pushed steadily ahead, running where the trail was fairly clear, using his great strength, his whipcord muscles, to push aside obstacles where he encountered them.

Though free from the superstitious terror of his follower, he realized to the full the danger of his situation.

As Bomba ran, his keen eyes searched the jungle for something, anything, that would serve

as a shelter from the great wind until its wrath should be overpast.

He was aware as he sped along that the trail sloped at an acute angle downward. It was at times almost as though he were descending the slope of a mountain, and as the path grew more slippery, more covered with muck and slime, his progress was inevitably slower.

Once or twice he was forced to catch hold of low-lying branches to keep himself from plunging headlong down the steep descent.

And always that sense of oppression grew.

The air became heavy, hard to breathe. The uncanny light spread until the whole jungle was bathed in a ghastly, greenish glare.

Then, suddenly, came the great wind, rushing through the jungle like a mighty giant, carrying destruction before it.

Gibo shrieked and flung himself full length upon the ground.

CHAPTER VII

TRAPPED

BOMBA heard a mighty, rending crash, and looked back along the trail toward Gibo.

A tree, uprooted bodily by the wind, was tearing its way earthward, its branches, interlocking in those of other trees that delayed its progress slightly, ripping, tearing loose, plunging downward again.

The shout of warning on Bomba's lips was caught up by the terrible wind and carried away from Gibo. The wretched Indian lay there, prostrated by his own terror, directly in the path of destruction.

Bomba leaped to his side, caught at the man's arms, and tried to drag him away from danger.

He had almost succeeded, he thought, indeed, he had succeeded, when the tree, with a thunderous crash, reached the earth, pinioning the legs of Gibo beneath it.

One of the outflung branches caught Bomba in the chest and hurled him a dozen feet away in the jungle, where he lay flat upon his face, gasping for breath.

The fierce gale raged overhead. Trees bent and some yielded before its fury. There was a snapping and a cracking, a terrific rending and tearing, as roots were ripped from the earth and giants of the jungle came tumbling down with roars like the discharge of cannon.

Cocoanuts fell all about Bomba like a rain of gigantic hailstones. One of them fell upon his back, and he felt as though his ribs had been caved in.

He pulled himself to his knees and looked about him for shelter. There was none.

Bomba tried to stand erect, but the awful wind rushed down upon him and threw him flat. Overhead the gale roared and screamed.

Gibo!

Into Bomba's half-dazed mind came the recollection of the Indian pinned beneath the tree, and the thought stirred him to action.

As he raised himself on hands and knees, a falling coconut struck his left hand, numbing hand and arm to the elbow.

For a moment he feared the hand might be broken. But as he handled it with the other hand he found, to his infinite relief, that the bones were still intact.

Painfully, slowly, he made his way on hands and knees to the spot where Gibo lay.

He peered into the terror-convulsed face of the faithful native.

The eyes that looked back at him were full of fright, but they were conscious.

"It is the end, Master," Gibo said, in a voice scarcely above a whisper. "Did not Gibo say that snake was an omen sent by the Evil Spirit? Gibo goes to the place of the dead."

In a quavering tone he began to sing the death chant of his tribe.

"Let Gibo stop his song," commanded Bomba. "He will need all his breath to get clear of the tree. Gibo's place is still among the living. Bomba has come to help."

"Bomba is strong and Bomba's heart is good," returned the native. "But there is no resisting the decrees of the gods. Gibo will die."

"Does Gibo feel any pain?" asked the lad.

"No, Master. Gibo did at first, but now it is as though he had no legs. They are like those of one dead."

Bomba began a tortuous progress, serpent-wise, beneath the branches to get an idea of the exact situation.

If the trunk caught Gibo's legs, it would have been impossible to extricate them. But Bomba found that they were held under a giant bough, which, although a small tree in itself, did not compare in size with the parent trunk.

Bomba tried to lift the bough, but found himself powerless to move it.

His left arm and hand were still numb. In his cramped position beneath the heavy interlocking branches he could get no leverage.

He lay still for some moments, wondering what he could do.

All around him in the jungle was the roaring of the wind. The ripping and tearing of roots being dragged from the earth werē louder than ever.

Bomba knew that it would be almost certain death to face that wind in its fury. Crouched beneath the spreading branches of the tree, he was partially protected from the wrath of the hurricane. Robbed of this protection, he could not hope to survive.

He wriggled his way beneath the branches until he came to the side of Gibo.

"Bomba and Gibo will wait here till the great wind ceases to blow," he said. "Then Bomba will find some way of lifting the bough, and we shall go on again."

"As the master says," returned Gibo patiently.

For a long time they lay there, finding comfort in each other's companionship, while pandemonium raged around them.

At last the roar of the great wind subsided to a mutter. After that, a silence, so intense after the

uproar that had preceded it as to be almost painful, settled over the jungle.

Bomba wormed his way out from under the branches and stood erect.

Débris of all kinds covered the ground. In some places the cocoanuts stood in mounds, as though they had been placed that way by human agency to be carted off.

Birds and beasts were also among the victims of the wind of death. Many of the smaller animals had been crushed by falling trees as they scurried along in panic.

At Bomba's feet lay a bird of gorgeous plumage. The boy picked it up gently. Its neck hung limp, broken where it had been dashed against a tree or rock by the force of the tornado.

Bomba replaced the poor little victim on a pile of broken branches, and circled the arms of the tree that pinioned Gibo to earth.

He strove to lift the heavy bough, using his right hand and arm, but could not manage it. He tested the left arm, which had been numbed by the blow of the cocoanut, and found to his relief that feeling had returned to it.

He bent to his task again with both arms, straining, tugging, grunting.

No use. The bough could not be budged.

He stood erect once more and looked about him. He saw among the débris the slender trunk

of a young sapling that had been uprooted. This he sprang upon and dragged over to the pinioning bough.

He went back once more and tugged a large stone free from its resting place. He hauled and pushed it until it was within a few feet of where Gibo lay imprisoned.

Then with the sharp blade of his machete he dug a hole under the big bough. Into this, as into a groove, he slipped the sapling, fitting it so that its lower half rested upon the stone.

"Gibo," he called.

"Yes, Master." The cry came half-smothered from beneath the heavy foliage.

"Bomba will try to lift the tree. Be ready to draw your feet free."

Upon the extreme end of the long sapling Bomba bore his weight, using the rock for leverage. To his delight, the heavy bough quivered, stirred in its bed of ooze and slime, and lifted slightly.

Bomba pushed down harder and harder, gritting his teeth, bringing all his tremendous muscular power into play.

The trunk continued to rise. One inch, two inches, three, four—

"It is enough, Master," came the relieved voice of Gibo. "Gibo's feet are free."

Bomba relaxed his pressure on the sapling

slowly and the big bough sank again into the mud with a sucking sound.

The jungle boy hurried to the side of his faithful follower and pulled him out into the open.

Gibo tried to struggle to his feet, but Bomba motioned to him to lie still while he examined the injured members.

Gibo winced as Bomba's hands did their office, but the pain was not so great nor the injury so serious as both of them had feared.

"There are no bones broken, Gibo," pronounced Bomba, with great satisfaction. "The ankle is bruised and the flesh torn, but Gibo will soon be well again."

He brought some mud and leaves and a length of vine, then deftly bandaged the wounded feet. He found a tough and knotted branch from which he stripped the leaves and cut it to the size of a cane. This he handed to Gibo.

"The stick will take the weight from Gibo's steps. Let Gibo see now if he can stand."

With Bomba's help, the Indian got to his feet and found to his great relief and that of Bomba that he could not only stand but walk, limpingly, without too great pain.

"We must go on." Bomba looked about him, noting with some apprehension that the night was already touching the jungle with long creeping shadows. "We must find food and shelter for the

night, Gibo, and with the first light of dawn we will continue on our way to the Underground River."

Gibo shook his head gloomily as, with the aid of the stick, he limped on in the footsteps of Bomba.

"Twice we have had warning, Master, and twice escaped by the mercy of the gods. The third time will mean death!"

Bomba did not answer. He had just made a disconcerting discovery. The Trail of Ghosts, that danger-flanked pathway leading downward to the Underground River, had disappeared! The great wind had covered it completely with the wreckage of its passing. Not a trace of it was left.

"We are lost, Gibo," said Bomba somberly. "The Trail of Ghosts has vanished."

"Does Bomba speak truly?" asked Gibo.

"The Trail of Ghosts has vanished," repeated the jungle boy. "Now Bomba and Gibo may never reach the Underground River."

Into the lined and haggard face of Gibo leaped a look of joy.

"It is well, Master," he cried eagerly. "The Trail of Ghosts meant death to Bomba. It has disappeared. Bomba will live. Good. Gibo is glad."

The jungle boy turned a sober look upon his companion. His face was very sad.

"Bomba does not fear death," he said. "He is more afraid of life—without Bartow, his father, and Laura, his mother.

"Gibo has heard the words of Sobrinini," the jungle boy went on. "If Bomba's parents still live, he must find them."

"Bomba loves the jungle," pleaded Gibo. "Once he was happy here. He will be happy again if he ceases to look for those things that he cannot find."

Bomba shook his head.

"Bomba is white," he said. "His blood calls him to far lands, to other places than the jungle. Here he can nevermore find happiness. But come, Gibo, the night approaches and we must find a shelter."

CHAPTER VIII

IN EAGER SEARCH

BOMBA and Gibo found shelter before long under a shelving ledge of rock. They lighted a fire and made a meal of the cured tapir meat that Gibo carried in his pouch.

The meal brought comfort, and after it Bomba felt more hopeful. In the morning they would search again for the Trail of Ghosts and perhaps find it. If not, there must be some other path that would lead to the Underground River.

But the next morning did little to justify Bomba's hopes.

He and Gibo wandered through the jungle, seeking to pick up the trail again, until both were weary and Gibo's feet began to pain so seriously and look so swollen and angry that Bomba forbade him to go any farther.

They had come to a narrow stream, flowing between banks so overladen with tropical blooms that the gorgeous, flaunting colors almost hurt the eye.

Here Bomba settled Gibo with his back against a tree and bade him rest.

"Bomba will search still further," he said. "If he finds the trail soon, he will return and get Gibo. If he does not find it, he will come back at nightfall."

Gibo regarded his young master anxiously.

"There is danger for him who walks alone in the jungle, Master," he said. "Wait until the sun sinks and rises again. Then Gibo can go with Bomba."

Bomba shook his head and tightened the belt about his waist.

"It will not be the first time that Bomba has traveled alone in the jungle, Gibo. He will return at sundown—sooner, if he finds the trail."

He turned away and was almost immediately lost to sight among the trees.

Gibo looked after him, his eyes full of foreboding, and listened to the soft padding of Bomba's footfalls until they could no longer be heard.

He even started to his feet as though to follow the lad, despite the prohibition, but sank back again on the turf with a groan of pain.

Meanwhile Bomba kept on steadily, beating his way through the jungle, anxiously searching for landmarks that Sobrinini had described to him, any one of which might put him on a trail that would lead eventually to the Underground River.

None of these did he see, but after he had been hunting for some time he noticed that the ground

he was covering was leading him at a sharp slope downward.

He remembered that this had been true of the Trail of Ghosts. Even if he had missed the latter, he might now be going in the same general direction.

He debated whether to return at once to Gibo, or to go on a little farther by himself in the hope of uncovering signs that would confirm his belief.

He decided to go forward. His newborn elation lent him fresh energy and he pressed on rapidly, hacking with his machete at the underbrush where he could not push his way through.

Ahead of him loomed a mountain, its shadow cast athwart the jungle. Not far from this was a second, a bleak, clifflike pile, its sides caked with thick masses of what seemed to be dried lava. Both mountains were barren of verdure. They had the appearance of once active volcanoes now burned out.

The sight brought joy to Bomba's heart, for now at last he recognized landmarks that were among the most important of those named by the witch woman.

These twin dead volcanoes flanked the Trail of Ghosts. If he sought to pass between them he would undoubtedly find himself on the trail, the first section of which had been obliterated by the

hurricane. The great wind had cut a wide swath, but had not reached as far as this.

Confidence sprang up in him and a strong, pulsing hope. Success seemed almost within his grasp. He plunged forward, determined to re-discover the Trail of Ghosts before returning to Gibo with his great news.

The ground beneath his feet became more and more slippery as he advanced. At times the sucking mud grasped at his ankles, making progress difficult.

"There is a swamp not far ahead," he told himself. "Bomba must be careful."

Even as he muttered the words, his feet went out from under him, and he found himself falling swiftly through space.

He came to rest on the banks of a considerable stream. He was startled and shaken, but the fall had not been great and he was otherwise unhurt.

The small precipice had been hidden from him by the dense jungle growth. He had stepped over the edge without warning and was lucky, he felt, to have landed in so soft a spot, though it was by no means pleasant to be covered with mud.

As he struggled to his feet, a series of grunts caught his ear and he turned quickly toward the stream. There he saw a sight that stirred him mightily. What seemed at first sight to be float-

ing logs were making for the bank at a speed that no log had ever attained.

The river was alive with alligators!

Bomba started to run, but the marshy earth clogged his feet, sucking at them, trying to drag him down.

The first of the alligators had now reached the bank and crawled up on it, its hideous jaws stretched wide.

Bomba plunged forward desperately, making for the nearest tree.

Other alligators soon reached the bank and slithered up it with a horrid, slimy sound.

They would try to cut off his escape. Then they would close in upon him, their jaws slavering in expectation of a feast.

The trees at this point grew at a considerable distance from the river bank. Bomba had to cross at least thirty feet of treacherous ground to reach the nearest tree. He would have made it, however, if he had not slipped in the muck and fallen.

When he got to his feet again one of the ugly brutes was between him and the tree!

CHAPTER IX

FRIGHTFUL JAWS

BOMBA reached for his rifle. One quick glance over his shoulder told him that the other alligators were in close pursuit.

Before him death threatened. Behind him also. But the nearest danger was in front.

The great monster rushed toward him.

Bomba threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired.

There was a bellow of rage and pain. The huge jaws opened and shut viciously. There was froth upon them mixed with blood. The brute floundered about, beating the ground with its saw-like tail in the agonies of death.

Keeping out of reach of that thrashing tail, Bomba plunged forward.

The brief combat had enabled his pursuers to narrow the space between them and their intended victim. A swift glance told the jungle boy that the nearest one would be upon him before he could possibly reach the tree.

He whirled about to fire, but as he did so he slipped in the mud and fell to one knee.

Gaping jaws were so close that Bomba could

see far down the cavernous throat. The beast was so near that Bomba could not use his rifle, nor could he fit an arrow to the string of his bow.

In the fury of desperation, the jungle boy snatched the machete from his belt.

The jaws of the monster reached greedily for him. Bomba could already feel in anticipation the agonizing crunch of razor-sharp teeth.

He steeled himself, drew back his arm, hoping against hope to drive the weapon through the roof of the creature's mouth and leave it there so that the jaws could not close. It was a chance in a hundred, but the only one.

In the fraction of a second between the drawing back of his arm and the plunge of the knife into its target, something whizzed past Bomba's face.

An arrow sped through the creature's eye, the keen point penetrating the brain, the shaft quivering with the force of the impact.

"Quick, Master!" came the voice of Gibo. "Run!"

Lightning swift, Bomba was on his feet.

The horde of alligators had pounced upon the body of the one that Bomba had dispatched with a bullet and were tearing it to pieces. This gave the lad a respite.

But he knew that respite would be brief. Already one or two were edging off from their

ghoulish feast, remembering the man prey that had so far escaped them.

Bomba reached the tree, tensed his muscles for the spring, leaped up, and caught a low-lying branch.

He drew himself up and threw his body over the bough just as one of the monsters reared itself up to snatch at him.

The jaws closed with a horrid snap, but they were empty. They had been an instant too late!

Safe for the moment, Bomba rested there, spent and panting from his terrible exertions.

Then he looked about him. Whence had come the voice and arrow of Gibo?

He saw the Indian crouched among the branches of a neighboring tree, on the edge of the steep descent down which Bomba had fallen to the banks of the ill-omened river.

From there the faithful follower had had a clear view of the drama of life and death that had been enacted on the shores of the stream.

The bow and arrow of Gibo were still in his hand ready for action.

"Gibo's bow and his sure aim have saved the life of Bomba," called the jungle boy over the narrow space that separated them. "Gibo has been a good friend this day. But how does it come that Gibo is here? Bomba left him to rest his injured feet."

"It is even so, Master," replied Gibo. "But the veil was taken from Gibo's eyes and he knew that Bomba was in danger. It would not be well for Bomba to die unless Gibo died with him. So Gibo took up the trail and reached Bomba just in time to see the alligators climbing up the bank. May their breed be accursed!" and he spat as a sign of his abhorrence.

"Gibo is brave," declared the lad warmly, "and Bomba will not forget."

Beneath the tree in which he was ensconced, the alligators roamed about, giving vent to their disappointment by bellows of rage.

Bomba knew that they would stay there for days, if necessary, believing that he must eventually fall from starvation and exhaustion.

"Waste not your arrows, Gibo," the boy commanded, as he saw his follower taking aim at one of the beasts. "They are too many and others will come from the stream. Bomba and Gibo must make their way through the tops of the trees."

"Even so, Master," assented the Indian, slinging his bow over his shoulder. "Gibo is ready."

It was a way of traveling in which both were almost as skillful as the monkeys themselves, through their long jungle training. The trees were so close that their branches intermingled for the most part, although there were times

when the voyagers had to take daring leaps through the air from one branch to the other.

Grunts and bellows rose from the alligators when they saw the pair departing. For some distance the brutes ran along under the trees, but at last lost sight of their quarry in the thick foliage and, returning to the river, plunged in sullenly.

When Bomba thought that the pursuit had ceased, he descended to the lower branches and scanned the jungle narrowly. Convinced that the chase had been given up, he slid easily to the ground.

Gibo followed, though more slowly, owing to his injured condition.

Bomba uttered a cry of joy.

"Look, Gibo," he cried, as he studied the ground. "Bomba and Gibo have come again upon the Trail of Ghosts!"

Gibo hobbled over to his master and stood looking down on the faintly marked trail. He did not share Bomba's enthusiasm. His face was shadowed with foreboding. He did not demur in words, but his look was eloquent.

"It is well, Master," he said submissively. "If Bomba is satisfied, then also is Gibo."

Bomba glanced sharply at his follower, but forbore comment.

"Let us get on, Gibo," he said. "The clouds

are heavy and there will be rain. It is ill traveling on muddy trails."

They had not gone far when Gibo groaned and leaned against the trunk of a tree.

"Gibo can go no further, Master. His foot gives out under him. Let Bomba go on and leave Gibo here."

Bomba was touched with quick compassion.

"Gibo does not know Bomba if he thinks that he would leave Gibo," he said reprovingly. "Come, put your arms about Bomba's neck and he will carry Gibo."

"It would tire Bomba too much," was the reply. "Let him go on without Gibo."

"Gibo calls Bomba 'master.' If he is really your master, do as he bids."

In the end Gibo obeyed, winding his arms about Bomba's strong shoulders while the jungle lad bent his back for the burden.

Bomba's predictions were fulfilled, and soon the rain was coming down in torrents. Still he kept on indomitably, looking about him from time to time for some shelter till the rain should be overpast.

They were proceeding now in a valley that ran between the two grim mountains that Bomba had recognized as extinct volcanoes.

The trail, muddy to start with, became increasingly so from the downpour of rain. Noisome

creatures of the slime slipped out from under Bomba's feet or slithered across the trail.

"Master," breathed Gibo, "do you hear?"

"Bomba hears a murmuring that sounds like water beating upon rocks," answered the jungle boy. "It is getting louder."

"It is the wind of death coming again," muttered the native.

"Not so, Gibo," returned Bomba. "It is the sound of a river in flood."

He had scarcely spoken when the sound swelled into a thunderous roar and a great flood of water came rushing down the valley.

Bomba's quick mind leaped at once to what had happened. There had been a cloudburst further up the valley and one of the jungle streams had burst its bounds and was bearing down upon them.

An instant later it was upon them, and Bomba was swept from his feet and whirled along like a chip in the grasp of the torrent.

CHAPTER X

A FIGHT TO THE DEATH

THE strength of a giant would have been of no avail in combating that mighty flood. Bomba was whirled along powerless in that mad dance of death.

He struggled desperately to reach the shore. He clutched wildly at tree branches and rocks as he was swept along, only to have his fingers torn loose.

Gibo had been torn from him in that first mad rush. Bomba had heard him cry out, had tried to fight his way toward him. So might a leaf have fought against the strength and fury of a tornado.

Gibo was gone, swept away from him—to what fate Bomba could not tell. Perhaps he would never see the faithful Indian again.

He tried to call him, but the words were brushed from his lips as soon as they were uttered. In the terrific uproar he could not hear the sound of his own voice.

Others than himself were being carried along

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by that flood, wild beasts and reptiles surprised in their haunts. Bomba saw a jaguar vainly struggling to reach the bank. A great anaconda went by like a long tangled rope, so close at hand that its slimy coil brushed against his arm.

But there was nothing to be feared from them at the moment. They were too terrified to think of anything else than reaching a place of safety.

Great logs bobbed up and down on the boiling torrent, threatening at any moment to crush in Bomba's skull. His life was utterly at the mercy of the flood.

The tumult was awful. Howls and screams of animals, crash of logs, and the fearful uproar of the flood combined to deafen the ears. No nightmare could have been more horrible.

Breathless, beaten, bruised, Bomba was flung at last on something solid that did not give beneath his weight.

He crouched there, his hand over stinging eyes, fighting to regain his breath. His heart pounded with the effort until it seemed about to break loose from his body.

Then he brushed his matted hair from his eyes and looked about him. He saw that, at a point where the current sharply swirled around a bend in the valley, he had been flung out on a projecting spit of ground at the foot of a cliff.

Above him was an overhanging rock that prom-

ised partial shelter from the pitiless beating of the rain.

He was dragging himself toward this when he saw a dark, shapeless blotch upon the ground that, as he neared it, assumed the form of a man.

Hardly daring to believe in the wild hope that surged up in him, Bomba bent over the figure and turned it over on its back.

The figure stirred, moved, passed a weary hand over bloodshot eyes.

"Master," murmured the voice of Gibo faintly.

"Gibo!" cried Bomba in delight. "Now do we know that good fortune is with us that we should both be thrown upon the same spot of land. Is Gibo hurt?"

The man groaned.

"Gibo feels as though every bone were broken, Master. His breath sticks in his throat. He cannot move. He thinks that he is going to the place of the dead."

The gloomy prophecy would have disturbed Bomba more if he had not been familiar with Gibo's chronic pessimism.

He dragged the Indian under the sheltering ledge and went over him with experienced fingers. He was not long in reaching a conclusion.

"No bones are broken, Gibo," he said. "Gibo is battered and bruised, even as Bomba, but that will pass and Gibo will be as strong as before."

Gibo groaned as though in protest at what he considered a too cheerful prophecy.

"Before the sun rises again the end will have come for Gibo," he croaked. "He will talk with the spirits of his friends in the tribe who have gone before him."

To this Bomba made no reply. He again dressed Gibo's injured feet, made him as comfortable as he could, and crouched there, waiting for the storm to abate.

The lightning filled the valley with its uncanny glares; the thunder crashed against the cliffs; the rain beat in under the overhanging ledge, pelting viciously the bodies of the two fugitives from nature's fury. Not far away the flood still rushed along, carrying débris of all kinds in its welter.

Bomba was in a sorry plight, but despite it all, his heart was light. For he had found again the Trail of Ghosts, and though he had been swept away from it for a time, he knew that he could easily regain it after the flood had subsided. When the storm had spent itself he and Gibo would go on again, believing the Underground River that they sought could not now be far away.

He took out the map of Sobrinini, traced in blood, and studied it as well as he could in the almost continuous glare of the lightning.

He found what he was looking for and put the map away carefully in the pouch at his belt.

As he did so, his hand came in contact with some of the cured tapir meat and he realized that he was hungry. He had not eaten since dawn, and now the afternoon was far spent.

"Let us eat, Gibo," he said and suited the action to the word, with the native following his example.

Ravenously, Bomba sank his teeth into the meat. He had not taken more than a bite however, when a voice not of the storm made him pause.

He knew well that snarling, vicious roar. It was the voice of Polulu, the great puma, Bomba's jungle friend!

Gibo had also heard the voice of Polulu. He braced himself on his elbow and eyed Bomba questioningly.

"The great puma is close to us, Master," he said. "He is not more than the toss of a stone away."

Bomba nodded and held up his hand to enforce silence.

The voice of Polulu came again, louder now and more threatening.

The snarl of the giant puma was answered by another and then another. There was a vicious howling and roaring as three great bodies thudded against each other in deadly conflict.

Bomba jumped to his feet, his hand feeling of

the bow and the quiver of arrows that hung at his waist. Then he gripped his rifle firmly and bent above Gibo.

"Polulu fights against odds," the jungle boy said. "Bomba must go to his help."

"Then will Gibo go also," returned the native, as he staggered to his feet.

Not waiting to see whether or not the Indian was following him, Bomba crept cautiously along the cliff face, keeping close to the rock and sheltering his rifle as well as he could from the driving rain.

The voice of Polulu had sounded close by. Bomba judged that the giant puma was within a hundred feet of the spot where he and Gibo had been cast by the torrent.

And Polulu was fighting against odds! That must not be! Bomba must see that he had fair play.

Years before, Bomba, in traveling through the jungle, had found the great puma caught by the hind legs under a fallen tree. The jungle boy had been stirred to pity. He had brought the beast food and drink, talked soothingly to it, and had removed the tree that held it captive. Then he had bound up the injured legs and taken care of the puma until it was able to walk again.

The animal was profoundly grateful, and from that time on had been devoted to the jungle boy,

as attached to him as a dog to its master. Again and again they had met in the jungle to the delight of both, and more than once Polulu, as Bomba had named him, had saved the boy from imminent danger. Bomba would smooth the big head, and the great beast would purr like the cat he was.

Now Polulu was beset with foes. Bomba must help him.

Thirty feet away there was a sharp bend in the face of the mountain.

Bomba approached this cautiously, and as he did so the sounds of a furious struggle grew louder.

In two long strides he reached the bend. He peered cautiously about it, careful to keep most of his body behind the shelter of the rock.

Up to this point he had been sheltered by the overhanging ledge. This could not be said of the battlefield, where two great cats were engaged in a struggle to the death.

For a moment Bomba stood there, fascinated by the exhibition of unleashed animal fury.

One great jaguar was down, while Polulu, the huge puma, crouched above it, sharp teeth seeking for the throat of its adversary.

A second jaguar crouched on a narrow ledge above the battlefield, snarling viciously and watching for an opportunity to join in the fray.

As Bomba watched with dilating eyes, the beast

beneath Polulu made a desperate convulsive effort, half turned beneath the crushing weight of the puma, and fastened its teeth in Polulu's flank.

With a roar of pain and rage, Polulu tore himself free and sank his teeth deep into the throat of his hapless victim.

"Polulu wins," thought Bomba jubilantly.

But he had reckoned without the second jaguar. With a snarl of fury, that great cat hurled itself into the fray.

It landed full upon Polulu's back, scratching, biting, sinking its teeth into the sinewy shoulder.

Polulu whirled with a roar and tried vainly to rid himself of the tormenting thing on his back.

The prostrate jaguar, blood spurting from its lacerated throat, staggered weakly to its feet, rasped defiance, and fastened its teeth in a hind leg of Polulu.

The great puma, thus hampered, could not fling off its assailants. Neither could he reach them with his punishing jaws.

He roared in pain and defiance, but was being rapidly overcome by this double onslaught.

Bomba raised his rifle to his shoulder. He had tried to shield the weapon as best he could from the rain. Whether or not it would still spit forth death at his bidding he did not know, but he would try it. If it failed, he still had his bow and arrow.

Polulu was bleeding now from a dozen wounds.

A red tide flowed over his silky coat and soaked the ground as he rolled and writhed, trying to reach the two tormentors, who kept deftly out of his reach, with his sharp teeth.

Bomba waited, rifle to shoulder, until the beast on Polulu's back was uppermost.

Then he pulled the trigger.

There was a roar and a spurt of flame. The jaguar on the puma's back gave an almost human scream of pain and fear, and toppled over on the ground.

It writhed, snarling and spitting for a few moments, trying to lick the wound inflicted by the rifle, from which the blood flowed in an ever quickening stream.

Once more Bomba took aim. Once more the fire stick spat forth flame and death. The wounded jaguar lay still.

Meanwhile, Polulu and the first jaguar had reëngaged in a terrific battle. They rolled over and over, snarling and roaring, claws ripping through furry hide, teeth doing tremendous execution.

The blood flowing from Polulu's many wounds had weakened the old warrior. He no longer fought with his former strength and ferocity. His enemy was searching for his throat. Polulu fought him off ineffectually.

Again Bomba raised his rifle to his shoulder.

He pressed the trigger, but this time there followed no report, no fire and smoke and sudden death.

The "fire stick" was jammed!

Bomba did not take time to adjust the difficulty, but instead unslung his bow and reached for an arrow from his quiver.

Twang! The taut string buzzed as the arrow left it, winging its way straight for the eye of the jaguar. Twang! The hum was repeated as a second arrow left the bow, aimed for the other eye.

Two shafts were embedded in the brain of Polulu's assailant.

The luckless jaguar made not a sound, but relaxed its jaws, still agape as though reaching for its enemy's throat.

The giant puma continued to worry the carcass of his dead adversary for some moments, as though death had come so quickly to his enemy that he had not recognized the source from which it had come.

Bomba called to him.

"Polulu!"

The great puma staggered to his feet and looked about him at the call of that remembered voice. His head swung wearily on his massive shoulders. Blood dripped from him.

"Polulu!" cried Bomba again.

Polulu turned slowly. Through the pelting rain he made his way until he stood before Bomba beneath the shelter of the ledge.

Gibo, who had joined his master, shrank back. He had been witness before of this strange friendship existing between his master and the terror of the jungle, but had never quite reconciled himself to it.

Bomba reached out a hand, and Polulu licked it with his rough tongue and laid his head on it in token of affection.

There was rumbling deep down in his massive throat like the purring of a gigantic house cat.

"Poor Polulu!" exclaimed Bomba, stroking the tawny head. "Polulu is wounded in a hundred places. Come, and Bomba will bind up the hurts and stop the blood."

Polulu followed with hanging head and slow tread until Bomba stopped at the place where the overhang of rock gave greatest shelter from the storm.

Polulu lay on the ground at Bomba's feet, his great head stretched between his paws, his sides panting with his exertions, watching the jungle boy as he busied himself making poultices of mud and leaves, mingled with some of the healing medicaments he carried in his pouch.

Occasionally the huge beast moved his head and licked the wounds from which the blood flowed

sluggishly. But always his eyes returned to Bomba's face, their fierce glare softened to an expression of affection and trust.

Bomba bandaged the wounds of Polulu and the puma thanked him by licking his hand.

Gibo marveled at this fresh proof of Bomba's power over the beasts of the jungle.

Polulu, who had it in his power to knock the breath from their bodies with one stroke of his paw, under Bomba's influence was as gentle as a kitten.

Remembering the terrific battle Polulu had waged against two foes almost his equal in size and strength, Gibo's admiration of his young master grew.

By the time Polulu had been patched up and the bleeding of his wounds stopped, the storm had greatly subsided. The flood had spent its power and was rapidly lowering. The rain continued and the thunder still reverberated among the mountains, but the worst of the storm was over.

"Soon it will be night," said Bomba. "We might travel far and not find better shelter than this. Bomba and Gibo will stay here till morning and then go on their way."

They ate of the meat of the tapir, dividing their store with Polulu.

With the shells of cocoanuts which they freed

of their contents, they secured a supply of rain water that slaked their thirst.

They could not make a fire, for everything was sodden, but they made themselves as comfortable as they could in their crude shelter and settled down to wait for dawn.

In the morning, Polulu was still with them, and had it evidently in mind to attach himself to their party. But Bomba quickly disabused him.

"Bomba would like to have Polulu go with him," he said, as he affectionately tweaked an ear of the great beast. "But Bomba goes to the Underground River, where there would be poor hunting for Polulu. Let Polulu go back to his cave in the jungle and wait for Bomba's return. Bomba will have many things to tell Polulu when he comes back from his journey."

There was a rumble of protest from the cavernous throat, but whatever Bomba said was law, and with a parting lick of his great tongue on Bomba's hand the beast stretched himself and disappeared into the jungle.

"The puma has gone," said Bomba, as he flexed his muscles and stamped his feet to warm them. "But we shall meet him again some day and perhaps at a time when we shall be very glad to see him. Polulu is a friend who never forgets a favor and will some day repay it."

They made a hasty meal and started out again

on the Trail of Ghosts, which Bomba had very little trouble in regaining.

Gibo complained that he could not walk without falling apart, his muscles were so stiff and sore. But he was equally stubborn when Bomba suggested that he stay behind.

"Where Bomba goes, Gibo will go," he declared, his passionate loyalty rising above all sense of bodily pain.

Bomba was insistent, for he felt that exercise and the warmth of the sun would do Gibo more good than many poultices.

In this he was right, and after they had been on the trail for two hours Gibo was able to keep pace with his young master.

He was still, however, a prey to his habitual gloom.

"It is not wise to weary the patience of the gods," he said. "They have saved Bomba from the fangs of the snake and the jaws of the alligator, from the rushing of the wind of death and from the torrent of the swollen river. But there will come a time when they will say that it is enough, and they will no longer watch over the footsteps of Bomba."

"That time has not come yet," returned Bomba. "And it is in Bomba's mind that the gods of whom Gibo speaks will not be displeased with him

who seeks a thing that is good and will not turn back."

Gibo shook his head. Such sentiments did not fit into his theological scheme.

They had not progressed for more than three hours when Bomba paused abruptly and pointed to where a rocky pinnacle towered on the top of a cliff.

"There, Gibo!" he exclaimed in a voice surcharged with hope. "There, if the map of So-brinini be true, beneath that rocky pinnacle is the entrance to the Underground River."

He rushed forward and plunged into the dark passage that yawned beneath the tower of rock. In his eagerness to find the Underground River he relaxed his usual caution.

He dashed impetuously into a gloom so dense that it seemed to rise up and strike at him.

Without warning the ground beneath his feet gave way and he found himself falling, plunging, wildly clutching, into darkness!

CHAPTER XI

IN GRIM SURROUNDINGS

GIBO, following closely on his master's heels, also fell into the void, his shriek pealing through the darkness.

Together they plunged downward, slipping over dirt and stones, reaching desperately for something to which they might cling and hold, battered, torn, utterly bewildered.

"We are falling to the center of the earth," thought Bomba.

That was his last thought for some time, for he mercifully lost consciousness.

Not until long afterward did thought and memory return to the jungle boy. Slowly the mists cleared. He stirred, tried to sit up, and sank down again with a moan of pain.

He was in utter darkness. He held a hand before his face and could not see it.

For a wild moment the thought came to him that he was dead and was awakening in the Great Beyond. Would the face of Sobrinini rise before him, beckoning him onward in the land of shades?

After a moment saner thoughts came to him. He began to remember what had happened to him before the wild nightmare plunge into the darkness. He recalled seeing the pinnacle of rock, beneath which was a passage leading downward. Then had come the jubilant rush. Then he had plunged into the cave, had lost his footing, had felt himself falling straight through the air for a time before he struck the steep slope and rolled and tumbled the rest of the way.

Now he was lying in darkness, weak and bruised, at the end of that sharp incline.

The air about him was damp and musty. It was cold, too, with a chill that struck to the very marrow of his bones.

He was thirsty, with a thirst that parched his throat and made his tongue feel swollen and dry. And every inch of him felt as though it had been beaten with clubs.

He felt about him with his hands, and found that he was lying on a rocky floor that appeared to be covered with some sort of dank, unwholesome moss.

Bomba shivered and sat up. The sudden movement was protested against by every muscle of his body. He set his teeth hard on the groan that tried to force itself past his lips.

Gibo! What of Gibo?

Had the faithful servant followed him into the

cavern, or was he even now waiting in the sunshine above for his master's return?

Then he remembered the scream that had rung through the darkness just after his, Bomba's, feet had left the earth and he had found himself stepping into space.

That scream had been in the voice of Gibo. Then the Indian, too, had been involved in this misfortune. Where was he?

Bomba called out repeatedly his companion's name, but there was no response.

"Gibo!" he shouted, or tried to shout, for his voice sounded to himself very weak and far away. "It is Bomba that calls. Does Gibo hear?"

No answer!

The heart of the jungle boy was very sad, for it was borne in upon him that his devoted follower was dead.

As his senses returned to him more fully, Bomba became intensely conscious of the thirst that parched his throat and tortured his whole being.

How long had he been lying there? Many hours, for all he knew. He must have drink.

A sound faint and distant but vaguely musical, caught his attention. Surely, that was the sound of water.

Bomba stirred and the nerves all over his body sent messages of pain to his brain. He persisted,

however, knowing that he must bestir himself or die in that mysterious black hole.

He took out his flint and struck a spark. By its brief flare, that lighted the dark interior for only the fraction of a second, Bomba saw what he had hoped to see. There was a stick of wood within his reach.

He grasped this, shredded off some splinters with his nails, used the flint again, and finally succeeded in kindling the stick.

The wood was damp and burned fitfully, but as Bomba held the feeble torch above his head he felt renewed confidence. Once more he was Bomba, the jungle boy, able to meet and conquer the most desperate situation in which he should find himself. That spark of light was the har-binger of hope.

He got to his feet painfully, but found to his dismay that his legs sagged under him and that his head betrayed a disconcerting tendency to come loose from his shoulders and go floating like an inflated balloon in the shadows overhead.

He stood still, gripping the torch in his shaking hand until the dizziness passed and his head settled firmly in place on his shoulders once more.

"Bomba is weak from hunger and thirst," he told himself. "If there is food and drink in this place, he must find it at once."

He felt in his pouch for the remnant of the

tapir meat, but found that it must have been shaken out of the pouch in that wild rolling down the slope.

His legs continued to trouble him, and for some distance he proceeded very slowly and cautiously, planting each foot down solidly before he entrusted his weight to it.

After a while he grew stronger and the shakiness in his limbs decreased, although his head still felt queer and light.

By the aid of the dim torch he was able to gather that he was in a cavern of unknown size. He could not see the roof, for the light did not penetrate that far. It was evidently lofty and very wet, for drops of moisture fell on the lad's face as he stared upward through the shadows. It was broad, too, a great, gloomy place, filled with rocks of fantastic shapes and sizes, some of them bearing a resemblance more or less grotesque to human beings transformed into stone.

The stones on which Bomba trod were wet and sparsely covered with that same dark, slimy moss that he had noticed before. Here and there crawling things slithered through the slime, avoiding the lad's approach.

"They are like the evil spirits of the place," thought Bomba, with a shudder of repulsion.

The faint tinkling which the lad had taken to

be the rippling of water over rocks was louder now.

Bomba raised his flickering torch and peered eagerly ahead, hoping to see the gleam of water. Instead, he saw what made him start backward with a startled exclamation.

Not more than a stone's throw from him, lying face downward on a rocky ledge, was the body of a man!

CHAPTER XII

A SUBTERRANEAN PIT

BOMBA felt the hair rise at the base of his skull. He stood still, the torch held above his head, staring at the apparition.

That it was a corpse he had no doubt, for it lay still, as in death, hand dangling over the edge of the rock.

Was it perhaps some other wanderer of years ago who had been entrapped in that underground retreat? And was this a warning to Bomba of the fate that awaited himself?

For a moment he was tempted to beat an ignominious retreat. But pride and resolution conquered, and he went forward slowly, his torch held high.

So intent was Bomba on that prostrate figure stretched upon the rocks that he failed to see the danger that yawned at his very feet.

The torch threw a feeble zone of radiance about him, but failed to illuminate a treacherous spot where the ground dropped away into unknown depth.

It was fortunate that the lad was walking

slowly and carefully; otherwise he would have plunged head foremost into that rock-studded pit of death.

His foot slipped, and he cast his eyes downward. What he saw, or rather, what he did not and could not see because of the depth, made him step back sharply.

"The place is full of caverns within caverns, of pits within pits," the jungle boy muttered to himself. "Bomba would do well to walk as softly and wisely as the cats."

He glanced toward the ledge of rock where the corpse—as he regarded it—lay, and gave an ejaculation of surprise.

The body was moving slowly, painfully. The head turned slightly, the eyes blinked in the light of Bomba's torch.

Suddenly the lad knew that face—knew that the man was none other than his devoted follower. He cried the name aloud joyfully.

"Gibo!" he shouted.

"Master," said the servant weakly. "Is it, then, Bomba? Gibo feared that Bomba had gone to the place of the dead."

The Indian made as though to rise, but Bomba checked him in sudden fear.

"Let Gibo take care! There is a deep pit beneath! Let Gibo not move or he will fall into it."

The caution came too late. Gibo, not realizing the danger of his position, made a sudden movement, slipped, and clutched wildly at the glassy surface of the rock.

Bomba sprang forward, dropping the torch, which sputtered and flared on the wet ground.

He caught the wildly flailing arm of Gibo and braced himself to withstand the man's weight.

He pulled Gibo toward him, flung his arms about his body and threw himself on the slippery rock, struggling to save Gibo from a plunge into that yawning pit below.

For what seemed an eternity he strained and pulled on the edge of that shelving rock; then, with every muscle stretched to the utmost, he dragged Gibo to safety.

He lay there for a moment, panting, Gibo still clasped in his arms. Then he released the Indian gently and reached for the sputtering torch.

"Bomba thought that Gibo was dead," he said, "and Bomba's heart was heavy within him. But now it is light when it finds that there is still life in Gibo's body."

"Gibo knows not how it comes to pass that he is still alive," returned the Indian. "He remembers falling into a great darkness that reached up its arms to him. After that he knew nothing till he heard the voice of Bomba."

"The gods were good to us, or neither could have escaped death," declared Bomba.

"Gibo is not sure yet that he is not in the place of the dead," returned Gibo lugubriously. "His head is dizzy and his whole body is full of pains, and where his stomach was there is only an empty cavern."

"We are both in need of food," the jungle boy agreed. "But where we shall find it is more than Bomba knows. There is nothing here at which Bomba's rifle can bark or his arrow sing."

"Alas, Master," moaned Gibo, "this place will be our grave. Bomba and Gibo will never more see the light of day."

"Where there is a way in there is also a way out," declared the jungle boy.

"Not unless they had the wings of bats could Bomba and Gibo return by the way they came in," replied Gibo, and Bomba, despite the cheerful tone he resolutely maintained, was not sure in his heart but that the Indian was right.

Leaving Gibo to nurse his bruises, Bomba went in search of something from which he could make another torch. His own was nearly burned out, and he had no mind to be left in darkness on the edge of that yawning pit.

After considerable search he found some sticks similar to the first. From the expiring torch he

lighted two others and handed one of them to Gibo.

"Light is a gift of the gods," he said. "With it we can see the dangers that lie in wait for our feet."

"They are many, Master," returned Gibo gloomily. "What use is light when we know we cannot leave this place alive?"

"Gibo speaks foolish words," said Bomba sharply. "They are what a weakling might speak. Gibo is brave. Bomba has seen him fight with jaguars, with anacondas, and with the savage head-hunters, and Gibo has not turned pale. Why, then, is he so fearful now?"

"Gibo does not fear things that his spear can pierce and his club can strike," replied the native. "But no man can fight against the evil spirits that dwell in a place like this."

"Bomba will fight against anything that bars his way, whether it be beasts or men or demons," replied the lad undauntedly. "He will not give up while there is breath left in his body. Come now, Gibo. Try if your legs are strong enough to walk."

While Gibo hobbled about, groaning dismally, Bomba went to the edge of the pit, flung himself on his face and lowered his torch, sending the light downward as far as it would go.

The feeble torch partly illumined a steep de-

scent, liberally studded with rocks, such as Bomba had already observed to abound in the cavern. These would afford footholds and handholds in making a descent.

Perhaps at the bottom of the pit they might find a passage leading from this underground tomb.

He returned swiftly to announce the news to Gibo.

He found the native still buried in gloom. His face did not brighten when Bomba told him of his discovery.

"What is at the bottom of the pit, Master?" he asked.

"That Bomba could not see," was the reply. "It is what we must find out. Let Gibo follow Bomba and be careful not to lose his footing."

Slowly they made their way downward. Although the large, jagged rocks made the descent comparatively easy, Bomba was again troubled with that strange lightness in his head—the feeling that he should hold it tightly with both hands to keep it in its proper position on his neck. Thirst tormented him. His tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth. He could scarcely swallow.

They must find food and drink, and soon, or they might never live to find the coveted passage to the outer air.

The pit seemed to extend to the bowels of the earth. Always, Bomba's torch, swung downward,

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revealed more rocks, an apparently endless collection.

At last Gibo called in a hollow voice:

"Gibo's head is turning. His eyes are dimmed. He can go no farther."

But now Bomba, lowering his torch once more, cried out joyfully:

"Courage, Gibo! Bomba sees the end. It is just beneath."

"Praise be to the gods!" ejaculated Gibo.

A few steps more downward and Bomba leaped to a comparatively smooth floor.

The sound of water was plain enough now to the ear. It was no longer a musical tinkling, however, but the steady, swift song of a rushing torrent.

Bomba went forward, holding his torch high. The light caught the glint of water, a great river flowing between banks of granite.

"Sobrinini was right!" cried Bomba. His voice was no longer weak and faint, but rang triumphantly through the gloom. "Come quickly, Gibo. Bomba has found the Underground River!"

CHAPTER XIII

ATTACKED

GIBO responded to Bomba's cry and joined his master on the bank of the swiftly flowing river.

"Where does it come from, Master?" he asked.

"That is hard to tell, Gibo. It must come from under one of the mountains we saw. See, it is fresh and sparkling. It is surely the stream of which Sobrinini spoke."

Bomba flung himself on the bank, and, reaching far over, drank thirstily of the cold, clear water.

Gibo did the same, lowering himself creakily and with many a groan until his lips touched the life-giving fluid.

When they had satisfied their raging thirst, they stood erect and examined their surroundings.

Their first survey was not encouraging. This second underground tunnel was much narrower than the one into which they had first fallen.

The banks of the Underground River were lined with rocks, not easy to climb because of the moss that covered them and rendered them as slippery as ice. Nowhere about them was there

any sign of vegetation, except the moss, or of animal life.

It was a dreary prospect for the two adventurers, who were already faint and weak from want of food.

"Bomba and Gibo must eat or die, Master," said Gibo, "and nowhere is there any sight of food."

"Let Gibo stay here while Bomba looks about him," directed the lad. "Bomba will try to see where this river leads."

While the Indian squatted on the river's bank, staring moodily into the water, the jungle boy set out to explore.

He went in one direction, then in another, and eventually made the discovery that to the north the banks of the river climbed steadily upward while to the south they seemed to sink still more deeply into the bowels of the earth.

He returned to Gibo.

"We will follow in the direction that the river flows," he stated. "There must be some place where it once more seeks the light of day. Come, Gibo."

The native rose dubiously.

"Gibo will follow, Master, for to stay where he is is certain death. But there is no food in this place of evil. It will be the tomb of Bomba and Gibo."

To this Bomba made no answer. In his heart he felt it likely that Gibo's dismal forebodings were justified. He himself was growing steadily weaker from hunger.

Nevertheless, he refused to relinquish hope, and he was still buoyed up by the thrill of having found the Underground River spoken of by Sobrinini.

"Bomba will not die," he told himself, "until he has found Bartow and Laura. Neither will he leave the Underground River until it has yielded up its secret."

He had need of all his courage during the heart-breaking journey that ensued.

The rocks clustered more thickly, were more jagged, and the footing was more treacherous as they progressed. They were forced often to stop and rest. The gnawing emptiness was a torment.

At last Gibo cried out hoarsely:

"Gibo can go no farther, Master. He will stay here and die."

"Then Bomba will stay with Gibo," said the jungle boy. "We will die together."

In vain did the native entreat Bomba to leave him, to go on and try to save himself.

"Bomba will not go without Gibo, who has been with him through so many dangers and has more than once saved Bomba's life. Bomba has spoken."

"Then let Gibo lean on Bomba's arm and he will try to go on still further," was the reply.

With Bomba's help, Gibo managed to go on for a short distance, but again collapsed, gasping for breath.

"Master, go on," he panted. "Gibo's bones are like wax. He must lie here and die."

He was clearly spent. Bomba pondered for a moment.

"Bomba will go on," he said at last. "But he will come back. Let Gibo wait here for Bomba."

He propped the Indian's back against a rock and struggled on. He was all but exhausted himself. Once the torch dropped from his nerveless fingers, and in reaching for it his fingers felt something slimy that moved under his touch.

A sharp hiss warned him of danger. Almost automatically, he lifted his heel and brought it down like a flash on the reptile's head. He held it there till the creature ceased to move.

By the light of his torch he examined the reptile. It was black and striped with orange, and was of a species he had never before seen.

He flung the body into the river, where it was caught by the current and instantly disappeared.

Evidently other deaths than by starvation might await him and Gibo in this awful underground retreat!

He dismissed that thought from his mind and

plodded onward, forcing his weary muscles to action when they rebelled.

Then he noticed that not only the river grew broader, but that the tunnel itself seemed to be widening out.

The river bank was less steep, the rocks were more scattered. It was possible for a considerable distance to walk on a comparatively horizontal surface.

His torch was burning low and he took a fresh stick from a number that he had thrust in his belt, lighted it and took stock of his surroundings.

What he saw there filled him with amazement and in some degree with consternation.

At that point the river seemed to divide into five parts, each of the courses flowing through a tunnel of its own.

Any one of these tunnels, thought Bomba, might lead to the upper air, to light and sunshine and food. But which one?

"Bomba must explore them all, perhaps," thought the weary lad. "He cannot do it all alone. Gibo will be rested soon. Perhaps he can help Bomba."

Slowly, painfully, the jungle boy retraced his steps toward the spot where he had left his follower.

He had covered perhaps half the distance when

a sharp cry reached his ears, echoing from deep within the tunnel.

"Master!" came in Gibo's voice. "Help! Help me! Master! Help!"

Through Bomba's weary body coursed new strength.

He flung himself forward, regardless of the jagged rocks that tore his flesh. Twice he dropped his torch and twice regained it with an impatient cry.

Gibo's voice spurred him on.

"It is dragging Gibo down, Master! It is killing him! Help! Help!"

CHAPTER XIV

A HIDEOUS ENEMY

OVER the last of the rocks Bomba flung himself. He was almost upon Gibo before he knew that the breathless race was at an end.

"Quick, Master!" gasped poor Gibo. "It is a demon and it has Gibo by the foot. It is dragging him down!"

Bomba threw the light of his torch upon the scene.

The Indian clung desperately to a rock, clutching it with the energy of despair, while to his left foot clung a creature such as Bomba had never seen.

It looked like a cross between a devilfish and a giant centipede. Its pulpy but muscular body was immense and in color a bright red.

It had cruel, bulging eyes, which were fixed unwaveringly upon its intended victim.

Bomba picked up Gibo's heavy club, and instantly the awful creature released its hold upon Gibo and sprang at this new enemy.

Bomba struck at it with the heavy club, but

only hit it a glancing blow. He raised his club again, but was not quick enough. The creature sprang at him, tentacles waving like red streaks of flame.

Lightning swift, Bomba dodged, slipping into a crevice between two rocks.

A red tentacle waved above his head, serpent wise, seeking for him.

Bomba drew his machete and with a powerful stroke severed the great feeler.

More tentacles appeared, curving over the rock.

With the razor-like blade, wielded by a muscular arm, Bomba severed two more and cut others until they were hanging by a thread.

The mutilated fragments fell into the crevice where he was, writhing about like segments of dismembered snakes.

Crouching and panting, Bomba waited. There were no more of those hideous, weaving things, however, and the lad cautiously raised himself until he could look over the edge of the rock.

Deprived of its chief weapons of offense, the maimed creature had dropped to the rocky floor of the stream's bank and was retreating in a rapid, jerky fashion.

Bomba raised the club in both hands and dealt a rain of heavy blows that crushed the devilfish into pulp.

"It will harm no one again, Gibo," panted

Bomba, and added anxiously: "Is Gibo's foot badly hurt?"

"No, Master. The vile demon drew blood, but Gibo will staunch it in the stream. It sought to draw Gibo into the river where it might eat him as the crocodile feasts upon his prey. This place is accursed, Master. It is the dwelling place of demons."

"There are no demons," declared the jungle boy. "If this creature of many arms had been a demon, could Bomba's knife have bitten into its flesh? Would blood have followed the cut? Let Gibo put away his foolish talk of demons."

"It was a demon, Master," persisted Gibo, shaking his head stubbornly.

Bomba gave up. It was utterly hopeless to try to uproot from the native's mind superstitions that had been ingrained from birth. Besides, he had far more important things to think about.

He proceeded to recount to Gibo the discoveries he had made on his trip.

"There the river divides into five courses, Gibo. We must try the tunnels one after the other until we come to the one that will lead us into the light of day, to the cool outside air, and, most of all, to food. Is Gibo strong enough now to walk?"

"Gibo is rested now, and he will follow his master while there is strength left in his body," was the reply.

"Gibo has spoken well," said Bomba. "Come, let us be on the march."

He led the way over and about the rocks. Their progress was slow and marked with many pauses.

For both now were on the verge of exhaustion. Hunger stole the strength from their limbs. The chill of that dark, sunless cavern penetrated to the very marrow of their bones.

They shook as with the ague and their teeth rattled like a necklace of loosely set human bones that Bomba had once seen about the throat of a native chief.

They came at last to the larger section of the cavern where it widened out and where the stream divided into five courses, for all the world like the fingers of a hand.

Here Bomba paused and motioned Gibo to rest.

The Indian was not unwilling to do so, for he was again wearied to the point of collapse.

While they lay upon the rocks near the edge of the stream, gathering strength for a last desperate attempt to win to freedom, Bomba outlined his plan to Gibo.

"Bomba and Gibo will explore the tunnels together, for each is weak from want of food and they know not what dangers may beset their path. Each can use the other's help in time of need.

They must find food and some path out of this place, or they will perish like rats in a trap."

Gibo groaned and pressed his lean arms against his leaner body.

"It would be as well to die, Bomba, for then one knows neither cold nor hunger. It is the long lingering death that brings pain beyond all telling."

Bomba rose to his feet and by the light of his torch stared about him.

"Gibo and Bomba are not yet dead," he replied, "and while there is life in the body there is hope in the heart. Come. If Gibo is rested, let him follow Bomba."

There was nothing to indicate which of the five courses held the most promise, so Bomba chose the one that was nearest.

The tunnel was narrow, barely sufficing for footing on the banks of the stream, which, turbulent and strong, rushed along.

Into the dark plunged Bomba, pausing first to light fresh torches for himself and his follower.

Gibo plodded at his master's heels, shivering, his eyes turning with superstitious fear towards the shadows that danced mockingly on the walls.

His shadow and Bomba's were elongated and dreadful, now on this side and now on that as they shifted their torches.

"Master, we are doomed," groaned the unhappy native. "It is useless to go on."

"Listen, Gibo!" Bomba turned and faced his follower. "Gibo is wasting words. Bomba will go on till he finds that of which Sobrinini spoke. They keep saying themselves over and over again in the mind of Bomba—the flat rocky shore with the tiers of rocks rising above it like the seats in a grand opera house."

"Gibo does not know what is meant by those white man's words 'opera house'," mumbled the native.

"Neither does Bomba," admitted the lad. "But it must be a great place with many seats."

"What does it matter what Sobrinini said?" asked Gibo. "They were the ravings of a woman who was mad. The gods had turned her mind."

"Sobrinini was not mad when she spoke of such a place by the side of the Underground River," affirmed the lad. "It is in Bomba's mind that he will find that place."

"Alas, Master, Bomba and Gibo will not live to see it. They cannot live in this cold place, accursed of the gods, without the sun to warm them or food to give them strength."

As Gibo spoke, there came a curious sound in that grim cavern.

It was a familiar sound to those who dwelt in the jungle, the sound of combat, of growling and

snarling and worrying, as though animals were engaged in a struggle to the death.

The heart of Bomba leaped with hope.

"Animals mean food!" he cried, as he gripped his weapon. "Let Gibo follow Bomba."

Guided by the sound of the combat, Bomba and Gibo made their way as swiftly as they could over slimy rocks and smaller stones that slipped away from their scrambling feet and fell with a splash into the rushing river.

The noise of the fighting grew louder, and the adventurers suddenly found themselves in a wide space, where, among the rocks, several small, furry animals, such as Bomba had never before seen, not much larger than rabbits, were engaged in a furious fight.

Bomba thrust his torch into the hand of his companion and reached for his bow.

He fitted an arrow to the string and let fly.

One of the animals squeaked, leaped into the air, and fell down the rocks, landing almost at Bomba's feet.

The first arrow had scarcely found its mark before Bomba had fitted a second to the bow. Again the string twanged and another of the furry beasts fell, stricken in the throat.

Before Bomba could add a third victim to his list, the rest of the combatants had taken alarm and fled, disappearing among the rocks.

Bomba turned to Gibo.

The latter had wedged the torches between two rocks and was on his knees beside the first animal that had fallen to Bomba's bow, stripping the skin from its body.

Leaving him to his task, Bomba took one of the torches and made his way among the rocks and retrieved the other animal from where it lay, killed instantly.

He slung the body over his shoulder and returned with it to his companion.

"Said not Bomba that while there was life in the body there was hope in the heart?" the jungle boy cried exultingly. "Now will Gibo and Bomba eat and grow strong. Their eyes shall yet see the light of the sun shining on the grass of the jungle."

He drew his machete to skin the animal he bore, when a cry came from Gibo.

"Beware! Master, beware!"

Bomba whirled about, his knife uplifted.

A wild beast crouched on a rock above him, its body tensed for the spring!

CHAPTER XV

BY A HAIRBREADTH

WITH Bomba, to think was to act.

It was too late to raise and fire his rifle. Still more time would be needed for the use of bow and arrow.

Nor would a club avail against the power of that spring. It would be brushed aside like a straw by the impact of the huge body.

With a lightning-like movement, he threw himself flat on the floor of the cavern, but on his back instead of on his chest, so that he faced upward.

A great spotted body passed over him. Had he been standing, as the beast had calculated, the jungle boy would have been struck full in the chest and overborne.

As it was, the force of the spring carried the jaguar, for such it was, several feet beyond where Bomba had been standing.

As the brute passed over him, Bomba lashed at its hind legs savagely with his knife.

The keen blade cut its way through the tendons and muscles of the right hind leg, leaving it hanging by little more than the skin.

So that, when the beast landed, it came down on three legs instead of four, the crippled leg folding under the body.

Roaring with pain, the jaguar tried to gather itself together again for another spring. But without two hind legs for a purchase, this was impossible.

Abandoning the attempt, it limped forward on three legs, its eyes glaring and sharp teeth showing.

Bomba had regained his feet and stood on the defense with his knife in his hand.

In the place where the lad found himself, there was no room for retreat. The rocks hemmed him in on every side. If he had turned and attempted to climb them, the beast would have been on him.

There was no alternative but to stand and fight, and in a hand-to-hand encounter with an enraged jaguar and only a knife for weapon, few men were ever left to tell the tale.

At the best, even if the lad could get in a vital blow, he could not hope to escape being frightfully mangled before the beast yielded up its life.

Yet fear was a sensation unknown to the jungle boy. Life was sweet, but he had faced death too often to dread it overmuch.

His brain was as cool, his eyes as keen, his courage as unquailing as it had ever been in his

life, as he gripped his knife and waited for the onset.

The beast upreared itself to grasp him.

A heavy club whizzed through the air and struck the jaguar full in the throat! With a choking snarl the brute fell back, its forepaws waving wildly in the air.

Before it could recover, Bomba sprang upon it and buried his knife to the hilt in its heart, deftly springing aside to evade the huge swinging paws.

The jaguar rolled over and over convulsively for a few seconds. Then it straightened out and lay still.

Bomba coolly plucked out his knife, wiped it on the silky hide, and restored it to his belt.

Gibo hobbled anxiously to his side.

"Is Bomba hurt?" he asked anxiously.

"No, Gibo," the jungle boy reassured him, with a smile. "The jaguar's claws did not reach Bomba's skin. But Bomba would have many wounds now and perhaps be dead, if it had not been for Gibo's club. Gibo's aim was sure and his arm was strong. Gibo is a good friend of Bomba, and Bomba will not forget."

Together they examined the dead body of the tyrant of the jungle. It was a full-grown male of huge proportions. Had it not been crippled at the outset by Bomba's strategy and that swift

slash of his knife, the outcome of the battle would probably have been different.

"Bomba is quick," said Gibo admiringly, as he looked at his young master in dog-like devotion. "The gods have given him a mind that moves as the lightning strikes. There is none in all the jungle like Bomba."

"It were well to be on guard," said the jungle boy, his eye scanning the surroundings. "The jaguar may have a mate lurking in the shadows of the cavern. Hand Bomba his bow and arrows. He will keep watch, while Gibo prepares the meat and gathers wood for a fire. Let Gibo be quick, for Bomba is hungry."

The faithful native needed no urging, for his own pangs drove him to haste. In a short time he had gathered wood enough for a small fire and completed the skinning of one of the small animals. From this he cut steaks and roasted them.

It was with new courage now that the wanderers faced whatever might await them. Whatever terrors were in store, starvation did not threaten to be one of them.

With the meal they drank copious draughts of the clear, cold water from the river. They had been too busy eating to spend any time in conversation, but now Bomba spoke.

"It was not in Bomba's mind to be glad when he first saw the jaguar," he said, "for death glared

from its eyes. But now Bomba is glad that the jaguar came."

"Its meat will give Bomba and Gibo food for many days," agreed the native, believing that he divined his master's thought.

"It is truth that Gibo speaks," assented the jungle boy. "But it was not of that that Bomba was thinking. He is glad that the jaguar came, because it shows to Bomba that there must be some place near where the jaguars can come into this cavern from the jungle. And if there is a place where they can come in, it is a place where Bomba can also go out. It is for Bomba and Gibo to find that place."

"It is true, Master," agreed Gibo eagerly. "But then," he added more dubiously, "the jaguar can smell his way and he has eyes that see in the dark and his feet have trodden the trail many times from the cavern to the light of the jungle."

"Our torches will be eyes for Gibo and Bomba," returned the youth, "and Bomba's scent is almost as keen as that of the jaguar, as Gibo has seen many times. Now let Gibo cut much meat from the body of the jaguar, while Bomba keeps watch."

In a little while the Indian had prepared a good store of food, roasting it slightly over the fire to prevent its becoming tainted, and stored it away in his pouch.

Fed and refreshed, the two adventurers resumed their journey. If they were not in high spirits, they were at least much more hopeful than they had been a few hours before.

Yet, as they plodded along hour after hour without any gleam of light that promised an exit from the cavern, that hope grew less and less strong.

Their progress was dishearteningly slow. It would have been that in any event, considering the rocks over which they had to clamber and in slipping on which they received many bruises.

But it was made doubly so by the great pits that they encountered, round which they had to make long detours. There were many of them and they seemed to be bottomless.

Bomba picked up a stone and dropped it into one of the great yawning holes. He listened intently, but even his keen ears could not hear it strike.

"The pits are bottomless," he muttered.

"They are the abode of demons," declared Gibo, shrinking back as though he expected to see some grisly shape emerge from the awful depths.

They had no way of telling time. Day and night were alike to them in that intense darkness. But Bomba knew from the weariness in his bones that it must be far into the night.

"It has been a long day, Gibo," the jungle boy

said at last, as he paused at a spot surrounded by rocks that made a sort of natural fortress. "Gibo and Bomba must rest. Gibo will sleep while Bomba keeps watch. Then Bomba will call Gibo, and close his own eyes to get strength for the day that it coming."

"Let Gibo watch first," suggested the Indian. "His day has not been as hard as that of Bomba."

But Bomba refused the offer, and Gibo, throwing himself down, was asleep in a moment.

The jungle boy kept vigilant watch, but nothing occurred to disturb him. In a few hours he called Gibo and himself sought respite from his weariness and care in slumber.

When he awoke the pair made a hasty meal and started again on their apparently unending quest.

As they turned a bend in the rock, they were conscious of a curious glow at a great distance.

"It is the light of day, Master!" cried Gibo jubilantly.

"No, Gibo," returned Bomba. "It is the light of fire!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE LAKE OF FIRE

"FIRE!" exclaimed Gibo. "Then we are doomed. Said not Gibo that this place was the abode of demons?"

"Gibo says many things that are foolish," returned Bomba. "Let us go on."

"Bomba is great, but even he cannot go through fire," protested Gibo. "It would be wise to turn back while there is yet time."

"Gibo may turn back if he will," returned the lad. "But Bomba is going on. He will see the fire that makes the light. It may put things in Bomba's mind that may help."

Faced with the choice between what he considered two evils, Gibo chose to follow Bomba. He had never yet had reason to regret such a choice, for no matter what the dangers to which it led, Bomba's quick wit and unfaltering courage had thus far sufficed to rescue them.

The curious glow grew brighter and the air became warmer as they proceeded.

Bomba stood still and sniffed the air. His nostrils dilated like those of a dog on the scent. As

he had said, he had a remarkable power of smell, developed by his years of experience in the jungle. He knew the scent of snake or jaguar or alligator. Even the presence of human enemies had been signaled to him more than once by his olfactory nerves when there was no sight or sound to mark their presence.

"Does Gibo smell anything?" Bomba asked.

"No, Master," replied the servant. "But he feels the heat of the fire of fiends."

"Bomba smells sulphur," declared the lad. "He knows now what makes the fire. He smelled it before when the mountain broke asunder while he was escaping from the power of Japazy. He smelled it again when the earth shook and the pillars of the temple fell on Jojasta. It is the fire of the volcano, the liquid fire that runs down the slopes of the mountains like a multitude of red snakes."

The description was not reassuring, and served to deepen Gibo's apprehension.

"Let Bomba and Gibo turn back before those red snakes devour them," he counseled.

Bomba made no reply, but kept on undauntedly. while Gibo followed with steps that would have liked to lag but did not dare to do so for fear of being separated from his leader.

The light was brilliant now, so brilliant as to make their eyes smart. The heat, too, was grow-

ing almost unbearable. They could hear the sound of splashing, as of waves dashing on a rocky shore.

As they turned a bend in the path they found themselves in a place where the cavern abruptly widened out into a vast amphitheater. They started back at the scene that burst upon them.

Before them, in a great pit, was a lake of living fire! A sea, rather than a lake, for the fiery waves were in fierce commotion, tossing up and down and dashing against the sides of the pit that contained them, sending up great sheets of scarlet spray that almost attained the level of the rocks on which Bomba and Gibo were standing.

It was one of the grandest sights that the world had to offer. But it brought little comfort to the two spectators of its terrible magnificence.

Gibo was overwhelmed with terror. Brave as a lion when faced by animal or human foes, his courage left him at the sight of natural forces that he could not understand or combat.

"It is the abode of the Evil One!" he cried. "The drops of flame are the eyes of demons. They are glaring at Bomba and Gibo. They will reach up their arms and drag us down."

"Peace, Gibo!" commanded the jungle lad. "Bomba must think."

In truth, he had plenty to think about, and it was not of a comforting nature.

The discovery of this great pit of boiling lava had greatly disconcerted him. In the first place, it added another to the many dangers of the underground cavern. When he had first viewed the mountains from without he had recognized them as old-time volcanoes because of the ridges of dried lava on their sides. But he had thought that by this time the volcanoes were extinct.

Now he had to revise that judgment. This lake of liquid fire was ominous. And the fact that instead of being comparatively calm it was lashed into fury seemed to indicate the working of subterranean forces that might at any time find vent in a new eruption.

He confided none of his uneasiness on this account to Gibo. That superstitious individual was already staggering under the burden of as many fears as he could carry.

But what bothered Bomba still more at the moment was the discovery that there seemed to be no way around this pit of fire that barred his path.

It seemed to occupy the whole space from cliff to cliff. Bomba's keen eyes scanned in vain for a path, however narrow, skirting it on either side. There was none.

All their time had been wasted! This tunnel

afforded no exit. The arm of the river that they had followed ended abruptly on the near side of the pit of fire. Steam rose from the imprisoned water, lapping against the hot cliff that separated it from that scarlet inferno.

"We have taken many steps for nothing, Gibo," said the jungle boy disappointedly. "Bomba and Gibo must take all those steps over again to get back to the place from which they came. There are five fingers to the river. We have taken one and failed. We must try another."

At any other time the news would have been a heavy blow to the Indian. But he was so glad to get away from this fearful lake of fire that he was almost joyful.

"It is well, Master," he said. "Let us hasten from this place of evil."

Bomba turned to go back. He had not taken two steps before he was startled by a shriek from Gibo.

Bomba whirled about.

His faithful follower had disappeared!

Bomba leaped to the side of the lake of fire. He threw himself flat on the edge of the pit and peered over.

Several feet below him, clinging to a jagged edge of rock on the side of the pit, was Gibo!

Below the Indian the red waves dashed and

roared, sending up the crimson spray that all but reached the native's feet.

In a flash Bomba divined what had happened. A piece of the ledge on which Gibo had been standing had given way, carrying the native with it.

In falling he had thrown out his hands wildly and grasped the jagged edge of the rock some feet below. To this he clung as his only hope of salvation.

A slender hope! Already Gibo's hands were slipping!

CHAPTER XVII

FALLING ROCKS

THE agonized eyes of the Indian looked up into those of Bomba gazing down upon him.

"Help, Master! Help!" he cried. "Else Gibo falls into the pit of fire!"

"Bomba will help," promised the jungle boy. "Let Gibo not look downward, but keep his eyes fixed on Bomba. And let him do just as Bomba says."

The lad sought a hold for his feet. He found it in a cranny of the rocks behind him.

He reached down both arms to their utmost length, but found that they fell just short of reaching the native.

"It is vain, Master," groaned Gibo. "The Evil Spirit forbids. Gibo must fall into the pit of fire."

"Not so!" cried Bomba. "Let Gibo be of good courage. Bomba will find a way."

He drew himself up hastily and scanned the rock on which he lay. It was seamed with numerous crevices, and he found two that were closer

to the edge of the pit and would enable him to throw his body still farther over the brink and increase his reach to just that extent.

But in doing that he would lose much of the purchase he needed to exert his strength to the fullest.

The chances were that Gibo would pull him down, rather than that he would pull Gibo up.

Bomba knew what awful risks he was running, but he did not hesitate for an instant.

He would save Gibo or die with him, plunge down into that awful lake of liquid fire. He would rather die nobly than live ignobly.

Now, as he reached down, he could barely touch the brown hands of Gibo.

"Gibo must let go with one hand and grasp a hand of Bomba," the jungle boy directed. "Then let him swing loose and with his other hand take Bomba's. Let Gibo show Bomba that he is brave and puts his trust in Bomba's words."

The Indian, spurred by this last adjuration, let go with one hand. Bomba grasped it firmly. Then Gibo released his hold on the rock with the other and swung into space, with both of Bomba's hands grasping his own.

That dead weight seemed as though it would wrench Bomba's arms from their sockets. Under other circumstances he could have sustained it easily. But as it was, he needed double his ordi-

nary strength merely to hold Gibo, to say nothing of pulling him up.

Suppose his toes should lose their hold! They were already beginning to cramp from the terrible strain. Should they let go—Bomba refused to think of what would follow.

For a moment he simply held the Indian swinging over that awful gulf. Then steadily, calling on all his tremendous muscular strength and his indomitable will, he began the upward pull.

The perspiration broke out on his brow in streams and flooded his eyes. The muscles of his arms stood out like whipcords. His laboring lungs threatened to burst.

His strained body slipped still farther over the rock.

"It is vain, Master!" cried Gibo in agony. "Why should Bomba die with Gibo? Let him save himself."

"Bomba will not let go," panted the boy. "Let Gibo try with his feet to find a hold on the rough places in the cliff."

The native did so, and to some degree lightened Bomba's burden. Inch by inch, by their mutual efforts, the Indian was raised until he could rest one elbow on the edge of the cliff.

One more supreme effort, and Bomba drew him over on the slab of rock.

There they both stretched out at full length,

utterly spent in mind and body from the terrible ordeal. It was some minutes before either of them could speak.

"Bomba is good! Bomba is brave! Bomba is strong!" said Gibo at length. "He did not think of saving his own life. He thought only of saving Gibo from the death of deaths."

He shuddered as he cast a glance at that awful lake in which he had come so near to being engulfed.

"Bomba did for Gibo only what Gibo would have done for Bomba," returned the lad, with a faint smile.

"What Gibo would have tried to do for Bomba, but he would not have had the strength," returned the native. "The strength of Bomba is like that of the puma of the jungle. And his heart is brave above that of all men."

They paused at the spot only long enough to get their breath, for both were anxious to get away from the place that had so nearly been the witness of a terrible tragedy.

As they rose to go, Bomba gave vent to an exclamation.

"It is rising!" he said, pointing to the sea of fire. "It is higher than it was when Bomba and Gibo came!"

A startled look from Gibo confirmed the statement.

"Let us hasten, Master!" he implored urgently. "It will reach the top and come after us."

"Our path leads upward," replied Bomba, "and it will not overtake us."

Nevertheless, he hastened his steps, and Gibo needed no urging to keep up with him.

As they lengthened the distance between themselves and the lurid lake, the light gradually faded out and the air grew cooler. They breathed more freely.

An hour or two later they began to hear faint rumblings with here and there a louder and more insistent note.

"It is the demons calling for our blood," muttered Gibo, as he quickened his steps and looked fearfully behind him. "They are angry that we escaped the gulf of fire and they are pursuing us."

"No," said Bomba. "There are no—"

There was a fearful roar, the earth shook, and they were thrown violently to the floor of the cavern.

"The demons!" cried Gibo.

"Not so," replied Bomba, as he tried to scramble to his feet. "It is the earthquake. The volcano is speaking and the earth shakes as it hears the volcano's voice."

Try as they would, they could not stand erect. The floor of the cavern was indulging in a wild

dance that made it impossible for them to keep their feet.

Great rifts opened all about them. Rocks detached from the roof of the cave began to fall.

Gibo was groveling in fear, calling on his gods.

Bomba seized him and, crawling on hands and knees, dragged him beneath the shelter of a huge, overhanging rock.

Crouching beneath this, they were safe from the rain of missiles that came down with a sharp clatter from the roof above.

Bomba knew now the meaning of the rising of those waves of fire. They were being lifted by giant forces beneath, to be shot finally from the mountain's peak and flow down its sides in streams of flame. Probably at this very moment the volcano was in violent eruption.

And with the eruption had come the earthquake, all nature shuddering in the cross currents of mighty, unchained forces.

The din was frightful. They could not hear each other's voices, though they were crouching side by side.

The cavern floor continued its sickening swaying. Bomba and Gibo could not even maintain a sitting position, but were forced to lie flat on their faces.

The very rock that sheltered them was liable to fall at any moment and crush them to fragments.

Still, they must take their chance of that. Dangerous as it was, it was the safest place they knew.

Quake followed quake with only a few moments' interval for a full half hour. Then came wider intervals between them, until finally they ceased altogether. The force of the earthquake was spent.

When they were fully assured of this, Bomba and Gibo crept from the shelter of the rock and stood erect. They were shaken and pale from the ordeal through which they had passed.

They were soon bitterly conscious that the difficulties of their position had been increased. The floor of the cavern was littered with rocks that had been shaken from the roof and sides. There had been enough before, but now the number was doubled.

Worse still were the numerous cracks that had opened in the floor. They were of unknown depth, and to step into any one of them would probably mean destruction.

With great wariness and holding their torches high, the adventurers finally reached the main course of the stream from which the five fingers branched.

"One finger has failed," murmured Bomba, "but there are four more. Bomba and Gibo will try another."

"And if all four fail," asked Gibo despondently, "what then, Master?"

"What then?" repeated Bomba. "That Bomba does not know. The answer is with the gods. But what Bomba does know is that he will not give up while there is breath in his body."

He sat down on the bank and considered the situation. His chances of escape from this dreary cavern had been lessened by one-fifth. Four possible exits remained to him. Which one should he choose?

There was absolutely nothing to guide him in his choice. One was as likely to yield success as another, as far as he knew. He might as well draw lots.

If only Sobrinini were with him! He could only guess. She was the only one who knew. She had been this way before, at that far away time when she had buried that mysterious chest whose whereabouts was to be her sole secret until and unless she chose to impart it.

Perhaps, though, even if she were here, Bomba thought to himself, she would be as bewildered as he was. What chance was there that her poor disordered mind could have recollected the details of that journey so many years before?

Even then, however, she might retain that mysterious gift of second sight that had so often awakened awe in the jungle boy. He had some-

times been inclined to scoff at that. His reason and common sense urged against it. But he had so many times seen her prophecies justified that he had been uncertain, if not quite convinced. At any rate, he would like just now to have that uncanny gift of the witch woman at his command.

He roused himself from his musings.

"Let us eat," he said. "Afterwards Bomba will choose his course."

Gibo brought forth some of his store of jaguar meat, and, taking a canteen from his pouch, dipped into the stream for water.

Bomba took a sip of the water and spat it out hastily.

"Do not drink, Gibo," he warned. "It is poisoned!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PANGS OF THIRST

GIBO looked at his master with bulging eyes as the ominous words fell from Bomba's lips.

"What strange thing is it Bomba speaks?" he exclaimed.

"It is even truth," replied Bomba. "Let Gibo put his tongue to it, but let him not drink."

Gibo tasted a drop and pushed the canteen away with a gesture of repulsion.

"It has the taste of the tree from which the head-hunters take their poison to tip their arrows," he said.

The few drops that Bomba had already swallowed had made him feel ill.

"Gibo speaks truth," he replied. "It is from the earthquake. The gases of the fires have poisoned the water. If Bomba and Gibo drink of it, they may soon be in the place of the dead."

Master and servant stared at each other. Each knew only too well what the disaster meant.

The stream was the only source from which they could slake their thirst. If that were for-

bidden them, what would be—what must be—the outcome?

It was maddening, all the more so as the waters of the stream looked so inviting. There was enough water there to supply innumerable tribes. Yet they did not dare to touch a drop.

They were like shipwrecked sailors cast away in the ocean, with water all about them as far as they could see, and yet knowing that to drink that salt water would mean delirium and death.

This, then, the earthquake and volcanic eruption had done for them. They had thought to have escaped their terrors when they turned their backs upon the lake of fire and emerged from the shelter of the rock when the quakes had ceased. But now their power was being shown in a way more insidious and in the long run quite as effective.

"It would have been better, perhaps, if Bomba and Gibo had fallen into the lake of fire," muttered the Indian despondently. "Death would have been very quick. Now it will be very long. Would that Sobrinini had died before she spoke to Bomba of the chest that she had buried by the Underground River!"

"Say not so, Gibo," Bomba reproved his follower. "It brought joy to Bomba's heart to hear those words of Sobrinini, for in that chest are articles that will tell Bomba the things about his

parents that Bomba longs to know. And Bomba will yet find that chest. There is something here," and he touched his forehead, "that says that to Bomba."

"Bomba will not find it," croaked Gibo. "Why should he believe the words of a mad woman who spoke idle words that were carried like leaves on the wind? Bomba did not believe what Sobrinini said about Azra, the snake. Why should he believe what she said about the chest? How does Bomba know there ever was a chest?"

How indeed? The suggestion struck Bomba like a blow. How did he really know that her words had not been wild vaporings without a particle of truth in them? Had the wish been father to the thought? Had he been so eager for news of his parents that he had believed anything, however wild, that seemed to promise satisfaction of his longings?

But his incertitude was only for the moment. Deep in his mind was something that was neither thought nor reason—a something that he had learned to trust—which told him that he was not on a fool's errand. He had as profound a certainty of that chest's existence as though at the moment it lay open before him.

"It is idle to talk many words." He thus brought the discussion to a close. "We may eat, if we may not drink. It may be that the stream

will clear. But whether it does or not, there is nothing for Bomba and Gibo to do but go forward. Let us eat and gain strength. It may be that we shall find some animals whose blood will help us quench our thirst."

They ate heartily, turning their gaze from the stream whose rippling waters tantalized them.

"Which way do we go, Master?" asked Gibo in a tone which indicated that in the speaker's view one way would be as hopeless as another.

"Bomba took the thumb before," replied the lad, pointing to the discarded tunnel at the left. "Now he will take the next to that," holding up the index finger of his right hand. "Perhaps before we reach the little finger the gods will be good to us and show us the light of day."

Gibo grunted disbelievingly, but uttered no further plaint and followed in the footsteps of his leader.

This tunnel, too, had not escaped the shock of the earthquake, and was strewn with rocks that made the passage inexpressibly slow and painful. But the two wanderers pushed on with dogged resolution, for, with possible prolonged thirst in prospect, it was more imperative than ever that they should speedily find an exit from that black cavern.

Was it indeed to prove their tomb, as Gibo had predicted? The lack of drinking water made it

probable. The mere fact that water was there in such abundance, and yet forbidden, made thirst the more intolerable.

But the wayfarers averted their eyes and as much as possible their thoughts from the mocking stream and kept on their weary march, hoping against hope that the next turn in the path might show them an outlet from their prison.

Once Bomba's foot slipped on the edge of one of the bottomless pits, and it was only a lightning tensing of his muscles that drew him back in time.

From those same pits came a vapor that smelled strongly of brimstone, due no doubt to some subterranean connection with the lake of fire.

The vapor bathed them in perspiration and the odor turned them sick. It seemed as though all things were combining to break down their stubborn resistance against misfortune.

But the added difficulties only served to steel the jungle boy's resolution. He was the stuff of which heroes are made. He might die, but he would never surrender.

For hours, every one of which seemed a day to the weary pair, the toilsome march continued. Conversation practically ceased between them. They needed all their breath for the work before them. Each was engrossed in his own thoughts.

Gibo was commending his soul to the gods.

With him death was only a matter of time—of a very short time.

Bomba was keeping a sharp lookout for anything that might indicate that they were nearing the buried chest, the object of the perilous journey.

“The river is rising, Master!” exclaimed Gibo abruptly.

Bomba turned a startled glance on the stream. It was already close to the top of its banks and mounting higher with every second. Even as he looked a wave splashed over and lapped his feet.

“We are dead men, Master!” groaned Gibo. “Bomba and Gibo will be drowned!”

CHAPTER XIX

THE PURSUING FLOOD

"PEACE, Gibo," commanded Bomba sharply, as he looked about him for a way of escape.

No way offered. It seemed as though this time Gibo's gloomy prediction would be fulfilled.

This threatened disaster was one that the jungle boy had not taken into consideration. From the time they had entered the cavern the river had flowed along at substantially the same level, with nothing to indicate that it might burst its bounds.

What then had caused the sudden rise? Bomba's mind leaped to the conjecture that the earthquake was the cause. That terrible convulsion of the earth had perhaps altered the course of some jungle stream and diverted its waters into the Underground River.

Whatever the cause, there was no doubt of the effect. The river was now overflowing its banks and covering the whole cavern from wall to wall. Already Gibo and Bomba were standing in water, ankle deep.

To retreat was useless. Bomba's quick mind reviewed the course over which they had come.

There was nothing there that promised a place of refuge. To advance might prove equally useless, but it was the only course open to them.

"Quick, Gibo," commanded Bomba to the fear-stricken native. "We must go forward. Gibo and Bomba may yet find a place of shelter till the flood goes down."

"Why fight against the gods?" moaned Gibo. "It is as well to be drowned here as elsewhere." Nevertheless, he followed the jungle boy as the latter splashed through the water on the course ahead.

Bomba's eyes kept darting from side to side, hoping to catch sight of some harbor of refuge.

He scanned the walls of the cavern. At the place where they found themselves those walls were almost as smooth as glass. There was no possibility of climbing them.

The water kept mounting steadily and was now half way to their knees. As it mounted, their progress necessarily grew slower. The water tugged at them, sucked them back, seemed about to claim its victims then and there.

It hid from them also the floor of the cavern. More than once they slipped into the main channel of the river and had to battle their way back to the inundated pathway.

Now it reached their knees, and they could go forward only at a snail's pace. Doom seemed in-

evitable. Gibo had already accepted it. Bomba refused to accept it. It would soon be necessary to swim, and they could not long keep afloat in that maddened stream. For now the torrent was carrying along with it great logs that churned up and down in the boiling waters, one stroke from which would crush the swimmers.

Before long the water had reached the wayfarers' waists, and still there was no sign that the flood had reached its crest. On the contrary, the torrent was assuming an even greater volume.

"Gibo is spent, Master," gasped the Indian. "He can go no farther."

"Let Gibo take Bomba's arm," directed the jungle boy, "and Bomba will drag him with him till his breath be gone."

They plunged through the water around a curve in the wall and a joyous cry came from the lips of Bomba.

"Look, Gibo!" he shouted. "The steps in the rock!"

At the side of the cavern was a series of ledges that mounted one above the other like rude stairs and reached high into the gloom of the roof.

With new hope surging in their hearts, the struggling pair forced their way to the ledges and began to climb. In less than a minute they were clear of the water. Still they pursued their way upward until they were fully fifteen feet above

the surface of the flood. Then they paused to take breath. For the time at least, they were safe.

How much higher the flood would mount they did not know. But it would take an hour or two at least before it reached their place of refuge, and above them were other steps to which they could retreat in case of need.

Never had sanctuary been more welcome. Bomba was jubilant, and even from Gibo's face anguish departed.

Now that the awful strain was relaxed, they felt the need of food. They drew strips of jaguar meat from their pouches and ate them eagerly.

These satisfied the gnawings of hunger, but their thirst was still unslaked.

Their tongues were dry and swollen. Their lips were parched and cracked. Yet they dared not drink of what, for all they knew, might be deadly poison.

For the moment, however, they were too full of rejoicing at their escape from the engulfing flood to dwell greatly on anything else.

But had they really escaped? Was not this only a temporary respite?

The question forced itself upon them more and more as the minutes passed, for the torrent showed no sign of subsiding. The water kept creeping higher and higher, covering one step

after another, until in a little while it was again lapping at their feet.

"The river will not let us go," groaned Gibo, once more a prey to gloom.

"It must stop rising soon," replied Bomba, with an affectation of confidence that he was far from feeling.

They retreated a few steps farther up and waited, with hope sinking lower in their hearts. For that implacable flood still kept mounting, and before long forced a further flight.

Now there were only three steps left before the rude stairs ended at the very roof of the cavern.

They climbed to the topmost one, on which there was not room to stand erect.

Here they were at bay. They could retreat no further.

Soon one of the three remaining steps was covered. A few minutes later the second was lost to sight.

Then it lapped over the topmost step on which they were squatting.

"It is the end, Master," groaned Gibo, and began to chant his death song.

"Cease thy singing, Gibo," commanded Bomba. "Let us show the gods how brave men can die."

The water lapped their ankles. It reached half way to their knees.

"Listen, Gibo," said the jungle boy. "We will

not stay here to be drowned like shivering rats. When the water reaches our knees, let us plunge into the flood and fight it. It may conquer us, but we will defy it, battle it, die, if we must, with the blood hot in our veins and fighting to the last. It may kill our bodies, but it cannot conquer our spirits."

"Gibo has followed Bomba in life, he will follow him in death," replied the Indian.

With every muscle tense, they waited for the moment.

Minute after minute passed. Inch by inch the water mounted. Momentarily Bomba and Gibo expected it to reach their knees.

Was it fancy? Bomba dared not put into words the wild hope that surged through him. He bent forward and touched the water with his hand. It was lower!

The flood had reached its crest! The water was falling!

CHAPTER XX

WRITHING COILS

"It falls, Gibo!" cried Bomba, almost delirious with joy. "The water falls! See, it is down again near our ankles. Bomba and Gibo will again see the light of day."

"It is even so, Master," affirmed Gibo with equal delight, as he bent forward and touched the water with his hand. "Now may the gods—"

What chant of praise he was about to utter died in a gurgle as he overbalanced himself and fell headfirst into the water.

Bomba seized him and dragged him out, choking and sputtering. But there was delight instead of chagrin on the dark face.

"Drink, Master! Drink!" he shouted. "The water is sweet and fresh!"

Incredulously, Bomba cupped his hand, drew up some of the water and tasted it.

Gibo had spoken truly. All trace of the poisonous chemicals released by the gases of the volcano had disappeared. The water brought in by the jungle river outside had swept away the tainted water of the Underground River and substituted

its own clear sweetness. They were no longer to be the victims of thirst!

Kneeling on the wet step, Bomba and Gibo plunged their faces into the water and drank their fill. Never in all their lives had draughts been so delicious.

They rose at last and looked at each other with sparkling eyes.

"Now where are Gibo's demons?" laughed the jungle boy.

"The good gods have conquered the evil ones," admitted Gibo. "Yet," he continued, as he peered uneasily into the surrounding shadows, "it is not well to laugh at the demons. Their ears are sharp and their memories are long."

The transition from despair to hope had been so sudden that the wanderers could scarcely believe in their good fortune. In a moment they had been lifted from the depths to the heights. Whatever now awaited them, death from drowning or thirst was no longer to be dreaded.

With happy eyes they witnessed the recession of the waters. Yet the volume brought in from without had been so great that the retreat of the flood was very gradual. It was evident that many hours must elapse before the floor of the cavern would be uncovered and they would be able to resume their journey.

"Gibo and Bomba will sleep," declared the

jungle boy. "They will lose no time, for they can do nothing else till the waters go down. Let Gibo lie down and Bomba will watch."

"Let us both sleep, Master," suggested Gibo. "There is nothing of evil that can reach us here while our eyes are closed."

But the habitual caution of the jungle boy would not permit of this.

"None can tell what may happen when our eyes are sealed," he rejoined. "Let Gibo sleep now, and Bomba will take his rest later."

The Indian threw himself down on one of the steps that was freed from water and almost immediately fell asleep.

Bomba sat on the step above him, pondering over the events of that momentous day.

It had been a day of great dangers and great deliverances. Those deliverances had deepened the conviction in Bomba that success awaited him at his journey's end. Why should he have been so signally preserved, if the end of all was to be disaster?

No! He would yet win to his goal! He would find the mysterious chest that contained, he hoped, the clues that would enable him to find his parents.

His thoughts went back to Casson, poor old Casson, now so weak and frail that the slightest thing might break the slender thread that bound

him to life. Yet once he had been strong—strong enough to seek out and strike down the villainous Japazy and to snatch him, Bomba, from the scoundrel's power. The boy's eyes grew soft as he thought of what he owed to the old naturalist for that rescue.

Was Casson still alive? Or would Bomba find the old man's grave when he went back to the maloca of Hondura?

In musings like this the time passed until Bomba roused Gibo and himself lay down to sleep. He woke refreshed, to find Gibo regarding him.

"Has the water gone down, Gibo?" was Bomba's first question, as he stretched himself and rose.

"Yes, Master," Gibo answered, as he turned the light of his torch on the Underground River, which was now running strongly but smoothly between its former banks.

"Then let us eat and be gone," directed the jungle boy, as he drew some meat from his pouch, Gibo following his example.

They ate heartily and then prepared to descend the long flight of irregular steps.

They were half way down when Bomba, in advance, drew back with a startled exclamation.

"What is it, Master?" asked Gibo in alarm.

"Look!" whispered Bomba.

At the foot of the steps, piled coil on coil, lay a giant anaconda!

A monster of the jungle it was, fully twenty-five feet in length and of immense girth. One contraction of those fearful coils could crush a man or beast into pulp.

At the moment, the creature was asleep. It had been caught in the flood and carried in on the bosom of the torrent from the outside jungle. The receding waters had left it stranded at the foot of the rude stairs. There it had coiled to renew its strength in sleep.

Gibo's eyes bulged in terror. The way was blocked. It was impossible to pass the monster without awaking it.

And once awake, that giant body would move like lightning.

His finger on lips to counsel silence, Bomba led the way back to the topmost step.

"Bomba and Gibo will wait here," he whispered. "Perhaps the lord of the jungle will wake and glide away without seeing Bomba and Gibo. If so, that is well. If not—" he did not finish the sentence, but his hand gripped the haft of his knife till the knuckles showed white.

"The eyes of the lord of the jungle are keen," murmured Gibo. "They will see Bomba and Gibo and then he will draw himself up the steps. The lord of the jungle will be hungry."

He shivered violently.

"Let him come," replied the jungle boy grimly. "He will not find Bomba sleeping."

His mind worked swiftly. He could attack the monster now, take it by surprise while sleeping.

But the light was poor and he would have to shoot rifle or arrow more or less at random. He knew the tremendous vitality of the anaconda. It might have twenty wounds, and yet, unless one were in a vital part, fight as fiercely as ever.

No, it would be vastly wiser to take the chance of the reptile awaking and gliding away of its own accord to seek an exit to the outside world.

Another perplexity assailed the youth. It regarded the matter of lights.

If they kept their torches burning, the snake's attention would be attracted to the light as soon as it opened his eyes and looked about.

On the other hand, if they extinguished them, the chances of discovery would be less, but in the event that the monster's keen eyes did make them out and the snake advanced to the attack, there would not be time to relight the torches with flint and steel, and they would have to fight in the dark.

That would be fatal. The anaconda's advantage would be overwhelming.

The lad compromised by placing the torches behind them and covering them with their pouches from which they could snatch them in an instant.

This again had the disadvantage of not enabling them to watch the anaconda as closely as they could wish. All they could see at the moment was the great mass of coils, standing out as a deeper blur on the darkness.

But they knew that the moment that awful head was lifted two eyes like sparks of fire would glitter in the darkness.

Bomba and Gibo sat, rigid as statues, watching for those sparks of fire!

For a time that seemed endless they sat thus, unmoving. Then Bomba nudged Gibo.

The blurred mass below was moving. Something rose from the mass and towered high. And in that something were sparks of fire!

The great body uncoiled. Bomba and Gibo each held his breath.

Neither thought the monster saw them. There was no hiss, no sign of fury. But the snake was used to climbing, and perhaps the sight of the rude ledges suggested a way to the outer air.

Slowly, lazily, it began to climb!

CHAPTER XXI

THE WHIRLING KNIFE

THE die was cast! The anaconda was coming!

Coming slowly, coming unhurriedly, dragging its huge bulk with a horrid, scraping sound over the rough rocks, but coming as relentlessly as doom toward the two adventurers crouched beneath the roof of the cavern.

Bomba cupped his hand and whispered into Gibo's ear:

"There is no room here for two to fight. Bomba and Gibo would get in each other's way. Bomba will do the fighting. When Bomba touches Gibo's arm, let Gibo snatch the torches from the pouches. Gibo will throw one torch in the face of the snake. He will hold the other torch high so that Bomba can see to aim."

"Bomba has spoken. Gibo will obey," the native whispered back.

The snake was now half way up the rude staircase. Still Bomba made no move. There was yet a chance that the reptile, finding the way so steep and rough, might change its mind and determine to seek easier traveling on the floor of the cavern.

But now the snake paused. A certain change was apparent in its movements. Laziness gave place to alertness. The head was upreared and swayed to and fro as the eyes sought to pierce the darkness. Instinct, or perhaps the human scent, had apprised it of the presence of an enemy or a victim.

With an ugly hiss it dropped its head, and the horrid folds began to undulate upward with exceeding swiftness.

Bomba touched Gibo's arm.

Instantly the Indian snatched up the torches and with a loud yell threw one in the face of the snake. Disconcerted by the sudden noise and the flare of light, the reptile paused, hissing horribly.

In that moment Bomba's rifle spoke—once, twice, thrice!

The bullets imbedded themselves in the thick coils. The snake writhed and floundered for a moment, biting savagely at the wounds.

But none of them had found a vital spot, and with a fearful bellow—the bellow of the anaconda that, once heard, is never forgotten—the reptile darted fiercely forward.

Once more Bomba fired, but except for a momentary quiver that told the bullet had struck, the reptile's progress was not retarded.

Bomba threw aside the gun and drew his knife, holding it by the tip of the blade.

The horrid head upreared, the jaws wide open.

The terrible machete, more like a short sword than a knife, hurled with all the strength of Bomba's arm, whizzed through the air, whirling over and over in the light of the torch.

The razor-like edge caught the anaconda full in the throat and sliced its head from its body!

The severed head fell to the floor below.

There was a horrid thrashing and floundering of the great body, and the red spray from the neck fell on the adventurers like rain.

In those hideous convulsions the rope-like coils slithered over the side of the rude staircase and joined the head on the cavern floor.

"The lord of the jungle will trouble us no more," remarked Bomba coolly, as he went down the steps and recovered his knife.

Gibo looked at his master with awe and admiration.

"Great is Bomba!" he exclaimed. "There is no arm like his! There is no heart like his! There is none like Bomba in all the jungle!"

"Bomba could have done nothing had not Gibo held the torch," replied the lad. "And Bomba saw that Gibo held it steady. His hand did not tremble. Gibo is brave. He is Bomba's friend."

They went down to the stream, washed the knife, and cleaned their bodies from the bloody spray. They gazed with repulsion at the horrible

coils of the dead anaconda and the glazed eyes.

"May his tribe be accursed!" exclaimed Gibo, as he spat on the stones.

They recovered the torch that Gibo had thrown at the snake, relighted it, and, walking gingerly about the dead body so as to avoid contact with it, pursued their interrupted journey along the tunnel.

Their progress was made the more difficult now because of the débris that had been brought down by the torrent and lay scattered about the cavern floor, logs, branches, and shrubbery carried away in the mad rush of the jungle river.

They threaded their way through and around this with great care, warned by their experience with the anaconda, and watchful lest other terrors of the jungle were lying in wait for them.

But the obstacles they encountered were all inanimate ones and they pressed on doggedly.

At first they were sustained by the elation that came from their escape from the crushing folds of the anaconda. It seemed an omen of good import, and, compared with the fate they had eluded, their present difficulties seemed small.

But as the hours passed without seeming to bring them any nearer the end of their journey, their weariness increased and Gibo's spirits wilted.

Bomba maintained his courage, but even that received a shock when they came to a place where the tunnel branched into a number of passages

running in every direction. There must have been at least ten of them, with nothing to indicate which one of them held out the most promise.

They had been perplexed before when five roads had been open for their choice. Now their bewilderment was doubled.

"It was bad when there was one hand with five fingers," muttered the jungle boy. "Now there are two hands and ten fingers, and Bomba knows not which finger points the way to the open air."

"It is vain, Master," said Gibo despondently. "Bomba and Gibo may wander for many moons in these places accursed by the gods, and at the end they will lie down and die. The jaguar meat will not last long. Already more than half of it has gone. We are under the spell of the evil spirits."

"Gibo has said those foolish words many times before," returned Bomba, "yet Gibo and Bomba still live. Bomba and Gibo will not turn back until they come to a wall that forbids them to go further. And even then they will not despair. If they die at last, it will be as brave men die."

He chose the passage that was nearest at hand and plunged forward into its gloomy depths.

Gibo followed, wagging his head from side to side in utter dejection.

That dejection became still more overwhelming when, as they went on, they came to a perfect

myriad of cross passages running into the main passage from all directions.

They were in the mazes of a labyrinth! Again and again Bomba had to pause to make sure he was not being diverted from his main course into some of the bypaths.

At one of these junctions he stood pondering a little longer than usual. Then he made his choice.

"Come, Gibo," he said. "Bomba has chosen."

There was no reply. Bomba turned about.

Gibo was not there!

CHAPTER XXII

IN DEADLY PERIL

A SHOCK ran through the jungle boy when he discovered that his faithful follower was missing.

For a moment he could not believe his eyes. Surely, Gibo had been there a little while before! Bomba had taken it for granted that he was close upon his heels.

Yet he had been so engrossed in thought that he might be mistaken on this point. He tried to remember whether he had been conscious of any cessation in the regular padding of the Indian's feet behind him.

But after all, it mattered little whether he remembered or not. The only fact of importance was that Gibo was not there now!

He lifted up his voice and shouted:

"Gibo! Gibo! Where is Gibo? Come quickly! It is Bomba who calls."

There was no response. Nothing came back to him but the echoes of his own voice.

Bomba was now seriously alarmed. He started back rapidly along the path he had come, keeping

up a continuous shouting. He knew that if Gibo were conscious and were in sound of his voice, there would be a reply. But all about him was the silence of the grave.

Bomba's thought went to the river. Had Gibo been walking too close to the edge and possibly fallen in?

But in that case there would have been a splash and a shout. Moreover, the native was an expert swimmer and with a few strokes could have easily regained the bank.

Into the lad's mind flashed the memory of the devilfish. Could a creature of that kind have stretched out one of those hideous tentacles, possibly have wound it about Gibo's throat so that he could not utter a scream, and drawn him down into the river?

But Bomba speedily dismissed that grisly supposition. It was possible, but the law of chances was all against a thing of that kind happening without some sound of a struggle.

But where then was Gibo?

The jungle boy went a long way back upon the trail he had followed until he knew it was useless to continue his search further in that direction. Then he retraced his steps, keeping up his calling until his voice was hoarse.

He reached again the spot where he had first discovered Gibo's absence.

Before him was the maze of passages leading in all directions.

He resolved that he would pursue them all for a certain distance, on the chance that Gibo might have strayed into one of them and had been unable to find his way out.

Even then, however, it seemed strange that Gibo did not answer Bomba's call.

A thought came to the jungle lad that chilled the blood in his veins. These bottomless pits, of which there were so many in the cavern! That very day they had been compelled to make long detours about some of these. Could Gibo possibly have fallen into one of those yawning depths?

Bomba was forced to admit the possibility. And if the native had struck his head against the side as he went down, that would have accounted for his not crying out.

But this thought was too terrible to contemplate, and Bomba tried to put it out of his mind. He would not, could not, admit to himself that Gibo was dead.

For hours he pursued his search, winding in and out of the numberless crisscross passages until he was forced to stop from utter exhaustion.

He sank down, panting, in a shelter between two rocks, his heart rent with anguish.

He had lost Gibo!

Until that moment he had not realized how deep was the affection he had for his faithful follower, an affection cemented by the many times they had faced danger and death together.

His thoughts went back over that association, ever since the moment that Bomba had saved his life by pulling him out of the boiling flood that had submerged Jaguar Island.

From that moment no dog was ever so attached to his master as Gibo had been to Bomba. He had followed him like his shadow, and there had never been a moment that he would not have laid down his life for him.

Never had he flinched from any danger that had threatened his master, danger from flood or earthquake, beast or reptile, head-hunter or cannibal.

Superstitious to the core, terrified before the supernatural, or what he believed to be the supernatural, he had always acted the hero in facing animal or human enemies. Bomba could not have had a more faithful or courageous ally.

But now he was gone and the conviction was deepening in Bomba that he was gone forever. He would never look upon his face again, never see the look of devotion in his eyes.

This dark, underground cavern had been depressing and terrible enough when they were together. But they had had the comfort of each

other's company, of knowing that they were not alone in these chambers of horrors. Even though for hours at a time no word was interchanged between them, there had been the silent pleasure of knowing that the other was close at hand. Neither was entirely cut off from contact with human kind.

Now Bomba would have to face the gloom and peril alone. Alone! It sounded in Bomba's mind like a knell.

Poor Gibo had prophesied that this place would be their tomb. It seemed certain that it had proved that for Gibo. How long would it be before it would also claim Bomba?

But the jungle boy roused himself from these gloomy musings. No matter how much his heart might ache, he must carry on. He had a mission to accomplish. If he died in attempting it—well, that was the will of the gods. But he would never quit.

He must maintain his strength. He took food from his pouch and ate. He noticed, as he did so, how little meat remained. Enough, perhaps, for two more days. After that he must find more or starve.

This, however, did not cause him serious apprehension. He had not yet tested the resources of the river. As he had walked along its banks he had many times seen fish breaking from the water.

He could catch some of these in case of need. He had no lines or hooks, but he trusted to his ingenuity when it should be called for.

He added to his rude shelter a number of rocks that made it a kind of fortification, any disturbance of which he knew would arouse him in an instant. In this he lay down and slept.

Slept fitfully, but slept and gathered strength for the day that was to come.

He woke with a sense of something lying heavy on his chest. His first impulse was to brush it off. His second was to lie as rigid as stone.

He knew that something lay on his chest that strikes as the lightning strikes!

CHAPTER XXIII

A TEST OF NERVE

FORTUNATE it was for Bomba that his jungle training had taught him quick thinking and a control of his nerves impossible to those brought up under civilized conditions.

Softly, slowly, imperceptibly, the jungle boy's eyes opened a fraction of an inch. From beneath his lowered lids he saw what he expected to see.

A jararaca, the Amazonian rattlesnake, whose bite means death, was coiled upon his breast!

The fortification that Bomba had built up, though effective against a beast like the jaguar, had not availed to keep out this deadly reptile.

Through some interstice of the rocks, the rattlesnake had wound his slimy way and, attracted by the warmth of the boy's body, had settled down upon his chest.

The puma skin had offered a grateful refuge from the cold of the cavern, and there the reptile lay in slumber.

But however deep that slumber, Bomba well knew that at the slightest movement on his part

that ugly, triangular head would be raised like lightning.

Then would come the stroke that nothing could avert, and the yellow fangs, dripping with poison, would be imbedded in his flesh. Twenty minutes later he would be dead.

Before lying down, he had drawn his knife from his pouch. It lay within his reach. But it might as well have been a mile away. Quick as he was, the snake was quicker. The least movement toward that knife, and his doom would be sealed. There was nothing to do but lie there with death not two feet away, and hope for the best.

It was a terrific test of nerve. Every impulse in him stirred him to push the snake aside and try to kill it before it could kill him. But that would be sheer suicide.

So the jungle boy lay there, schooling himself to absolute rigidity, knowing that his life depended upon the reptile not dreaming that it was lying on a living thing, a potential enemy.

How long had the snake been there? How long would it stay there? And if its stay were prolonged, how long would Bomba be able to keep in check his impulse to action?

The perspiration started out on his brow. The beating of his heart was so loud that he thought the snake must hear it.

A fly entered his nostril. He had an almost

uncontrollable impulse to sneeze, to eject the intruder. He did not dare.

His only hope lay in the possibility that the reptile, on awaking, would take no notice of him and glide away on a quest for food.

In that event, Bomba promised himself ample vengeance the moment he was able to spring to his feet.

But suppose the snake's suspicion was aroused in the slightest degree! Suppose the very breathing of Bomba that had soothed its slumber should arouse irritation in the creature when it awoke!

Then Bomba's doom would be sealed. The lightning stroke would come. Bomba might and doubtless would kill the snake afterward. But it would be too late. The evil would have been done. The poison of the serpent would be coursing through his veins.

That endless waiting! Bomba would rather have faced a group of hostile Indians. There at least he would have been stimulated by the lust of battle.

For perhaps an hour—there was no judging of time under those conditions—he lay like a statue.

His legs cramped. He had all he could do to resist the impulse to stretch them out and relieve the intolerable ache.

Then, at last, the snake awoke!

At first there was simply a lazy undulation of the coils, as though the reptile were stretching after its slumber.

Then from the mass of coils a head was lifted, an awful head in which two little eyes gleamed.

But the eyes, though evil, were as yet untouched by ferocity. The creature had slept well and was in a tolerant mood.

Through his half-shut eyes Bomba watched, praying that he might be able to restrain any quiver of his tortured nerves.

The jararaca's eyes, after looking about vaguely, came to rest on Bomba's face.

The reptile's indifferent look suddenly changed to one of intensity. Perhaps it had seen human faces before and recognized them as enemies.

The gleam in its eyes glowed more strongly. Perhaps this was worth looking into. The head lowered a trifle suspiciously and came close to Bomba's face. Then a forked tongue came from between the thin, cruel lips and played softly about the lad's throat and lips and ears.

It was horrible! Bomba felt an almost uncontrollable impulse to shout, to push the terrible, loathsome thing away from him, no matter what the cost.

But by a stupendous exertion of the will he remained as still as death.

At last the snake concluded that it was a dead

body. There was no use wasting poison on it. The head returned to its normal position, resting on the mass of coils. Was it going to sleep again? There was a limit to all human endurance. The jungle boy felt that he was rapidly reaching that limit.

For perhaps ten minutes, every one of which seemed an hour to the tortured victim, the snake retained its somnolent position.

Then again the head came up, and with only an indifferent glance this time at the marble-like face of the jungle boy, looked about for a way of exit.

It found it, apparently, in an opening through the rocks, and Bomba's heart throbbed with relief.

But he rejoiced prematurely, for the snake found the opening too small to permit the passage of its thick coils.

It withdrew its head from the narrow passage with a hiss of irritation and sought another one more propitious.

It found it in a crevice just above Bomba's head.

But to reach it, it was necessary to draw its coils over the lad's face.

All that had gone before was nothing to the shudder that ran through the jungle boy's veins as he felt that slimy body drawn across his cheeks and nose and lips.

Still, by an almost supernatural effort, he re-

mained quiet. If he could only do so for a few seconds longer!

He would have done so if a fragment of stone, dislodged by the reptile's movements, had not fallen and struck him in the eye. The sudden shock and the keen pain provoked an involuntary movement.

Slight as it was, the snake felt it. Instantly, with a fierce hiss, it threw itself in a coil and its head lifted to strike at Bomba's face!

The jungle boy, through his half-shut eyes, saw that awful head uplifted. He knew that he could not avert that stroke. He might as well try to dodge a lightning bolt.

He reached for his knife. He was doomed, but he would kill his enemy before he died. Then something whizzed through the air, and the snake's head was shattered against the rocks.

And there was Gibo! The Indian was fairly blubbering as he threw aside the club that had done such deadly execution and rushed forward to help his young master to his feet.

"Gibo!" cried the jungle boy, as he staggered erect and threw his arms about the native's neck. "Bomba thought that Gibo was dead! Is Bomba dreaming?"

"No, Master," replied the faithful native. "It is Gibo, the slave of Bomba. The gods led him

to Bomba just in time to save him from the stroke of the snake."

The jungle boy was shaken as never before in his life. The transition to life from what had seemed to be certain death had put his senses into a whirl, and the delight of finding Gibo alive when he had given him up for dead put the capsheaf on his emotions.

"How was it," he asked, when his head had stopped whirling, "that Bomba lost Gibo?"

"It was the fault of Gibo," responded the native. "Gibo saw what he thought was a light in one of the side passages. He did not want to speak about it to Bomba until he felt sure. He went into the passage and a stone from the roof fell on his head and blackness came upon him."

"It is strange that Bomba did not find Gibo," replied the jungle boy. "Bomba hunted for Gibo in many places, calling out Gibo's name."

"There are many tunnels," replied the Indian, "and Bomba must have missed the one in which Gibo was lying. Gibo's mind was dark, his ears were deaf, and his tongue was silent, so that he could not hear or answer Bomba."

"It is well that Gibo found Bomba when he did," said the jungle boy, "else would Bomba have died of the stroke of the jararaca."

"Gibo did not know that Bomba was here," replied the Indian, "until he saw the rocks that

had been piled up to keep away the jaguars. Gibo was drawing near to wake the master and tell him that Gibo had come when he saw the head of the jararaca trying to get through the hole in the rocks. But the hole was not big enough and the head of the jararaca drew back. Then was Gibo frightened, for he feared the jararaca had killed Bomba in his sleep. Gibo came closer, making no noise, and saw the jararaca crawling over Bomba's face."

Bomba shuddered at the horrible recollection.

"Gibo could have killed the reptile then," went on the native, "but he feared lest the snake should strike Bomba before it died. So Gibo waited. But when the snake lifted up its head for the stroke, Gibo's club was quick." He lifted the heavy weapon, red with the blood that bespattered it.

"Gibo is brave and quick," commented Bomba warmly. "He has saved Bomba's life. Bomba will not forget. Now let us eat and we will go forward."

He kicked the dead body of the reptile into the river, and then with Gibo made a hasty meal from their rapidly diminishing store of jaguar meat.

Their delight at finding themselves together again was beyond all words. The frightful loneliness that had weighed both of them down was a thing of the past.

With caution born of the many dangers they had encountered, Bomba and Gibo exercised especial care with every step they took, not lifting up one foot until the other was securely planted. They had no desire to plunge downward into one of those fearful bottomless pits that beset their course at frequent intervals.

But there was another cause for watchfulness, born of Bomba's adventure with the jararaca.

Bomba knew that those venomous snakes seldom dwelt alone. They were gregarious by nature, and where one was found others were probably not far away.

They kept on with every nerve at tension, until, as they rounded a bend in the cavern wall, Bomba halted abruptly with a startled exclamation.

"Look, Gibo!" he cried, holding his torch high.

But Gibo had already seen.

In front of them was a deep pit, roughly circular in shape, and in the bottom of the pit were tangled, writhing, rope-like forms in a perpetually moving mass.

They had come upon a den of snakes!

CHAPTER XXIV

A DARING RESCUE

SNAKES were there in the pit by the hundreds, jararacas, cooanaradis, and other varieties that Bomba and Gibo recognized, all of them deadly in character.

It was evidently the gathering place, the great tribal center of the snakes that infested the cavern, from which they made their individual excursions and to which they returned for rest and sleep when their forays were over.

The light of the torches had disturbed the reptiles from their somnolent condition, and scores of vicious heads and long necks protruded from the mass. A chorus of angry hisses grew steadily louder.

There was no way to get around that pit, which extended from wall to wall of the passage, completely blocking the path of the adventurers. Yet Bomba was exceedingly anxious to get on the further side of that den of snakes.

They could have gone back to the place from which they had started on their day's journey and tried some other tunnel. But that would mean

that all the weary miles they had traversed would be wasted. Besides, there was no guarantee that any other path they might choose would not be beset with dangers which, while differing in kind, would be the same in degree.

There was another reason why Bomba wanted to get on the further side of that pit of snakes.

His keen eyes had discerned in the distance what seemed to be a glimmer of light. It was only a glimmer and there was the possibility that it was merely a reflection from some pit of fire. But on the other hand, it might be a ray of sunlight shining in from some break in the cavern roof, a break that might serve as an exit to the upper earth and the light of day.

Bomba could not bear the thought of turning his back on that prospect of freedom. Yet how to get across that den of snakes?

He flashed his torch about. Its flickering light fell on the trunk of a tree that seemed to reach from one side to the other of the pit, a little to the right of the center.

Doubtless the tree had been one of those brought down by the flood from the jungle. When the waters receded, it had been left flung across the pit.

Most of the branches had been torn away in its tumultuous ride on the crest of the torrent, and little more than the scarred trunk remained.

It seemed to be securely lodged on the pit edge where Bomba and Gibo were standing. Whether it was as secure on the further side they could not tell from the light of their torches.

The trunk was wet and slippery, and to slip from that precarious bridge meant that one would plunge downward into the midst of that horrid mass of slimy bodies and poison fangs!

But there was no other possible crossing, and Bomba decided that he must take the chance.

"See, Gibo," he said, indicating the tree trunk. "It is by that that Bomba and Gibo will cross to the other side of the pit."

"But if the tree should fall?" suggested the native, with a shudder, as he looked at the writhing forms below.

"Bomba does not think it will fall," was the reply. "See. This end rests safely on the rock."

"But Bomba does not know that the other end lies on the rock," persisted Gibo. "It may be that only the branches hold it there, and they may give way beneath the weight of Bomba and Gibo."

"It may be so," admitted the jungle boy. "But it is a chance that Gibo and Bomba must take. But they must go over one at a time. Bomba will go first. And he will go now, for the snakes are growing angry and will soon begin to climb the sides of the pit."

There was, indeed, need for haste, for the reptiles had been thrown into a state of great perturbation by the presence of the intruders. Already a score or more were extricating themselves from the tangled mass and crawling to the sides of the pit with the evident intention of climbing up and attacking.

Bomba stepped out on the log. Below him a hundred swaying heads were upraised in hideous anticipation, and twice as many evil eyes followed his every movement. Steadily, the hissing grew in volume.

"The log seems firm, Gibo," called back Bomba, after he had proceeded a little way. "But it is slippery, and Gibo must walk with the steps of a cat."

Once he himself slipped and Gibo's heart was rent with anguish and awful fear.

But like the cat of which he had just spoken, the jungle boy regained his balance and kept on. On and still on, his heart beating fast but his nerves as steady as steel, while Gibo watched him with bulging eyes, muttering prayers to all the gods he knew.

At last, after minutes that seemed hours, Bomba leaped from the log to the ledge of rock on the further side of the pit.

"Praise be to the gods, Master!" cried Gibo

in infinite relief, when he saw that his idol was safe.

Bomba bent down and examined his end of the tree trunk.

"It is safe on this side, Gibo," he cried out over the chasm. "Now let Gibo follow Bomba. Let him keep his eyes and his mind only on the log and he will pass in safety."

Gibo braced himself and stepped out on the log, his movements hastened somewhat by the sight of some of the snakes that had nearly reached the top of the pit.

He had covered half the distance when his feet shot out from under him and he fell!

As he went down his arms caught the log, and he hung there, suspended over that horrible pit with its myriad upraised heads.

"Hold fast, Gibo!" shouted Bomba, in agony. "Hold fast!"

The Indian tried to swing his body up over the log. But the trunk was so slippery that he could get no purchase. One hand would slip and then the other, and he had all he could do to hold himself suspended, let alone draw himself up.

"It is no use, Master," he called despairingly. "Gibo must fall among the snakes!" and he began to chant his death song.

"Hold fast, Gibo," shouted Bomba, in apprehension. "Bomba is coming."

In a flash the jungle boy had leaped upon the tree trunk and was speeding toward his imperiled follower.

Then, if ever, the sure foot, the eagle eye, the cool judgment, and the superb courage of Bomba, the jungle boy, stood him in stead.

Again and again in the jungle he had crossed streams on logs quite as slippery as that which crossed the den of snakes. The experience had developed in him a sense of balance that a tight-rope walker might envy.

But never before in his adventurous life had he faced such an awful penalty for one false step. The mass of snakes below was in wild commotion. They sensed the peril of the suspended man. It seemed certain that in a moment or two more he would fall into that welter of slimy forms and hissing jaws.

And now, as their eyes followed the course of the jungle boy, they anticipated two victims instead of one.

This likelihood was increased by the speed with which Bomba was coming. He knew the terrible necessity for haste. At any instant Gibo's slipping fingers might let go their hold. It was no time for caution. Bomba had to throw that to the winds. He must reach Gibo.

"Be of good heart, Gibo!" he called. "Gibo shall not fall. Bomba comes!"

An instant later he reached the native. He threw himself face downward on the log and wound his legs about it. The next moment his powerful fingers gripped Gibo's right wrist just as the Indian's hands slipped from the log.

"Do not struggle, Gibo," commanded Bomba. "Gibo is safe now if he keeps his courage."

There was something about that calm, cool voice that instilled new heart into the native, and he hung motionless.

"Let Gibo not look down," went on the boy. "Let him look up into the face of Bomba."

He had been holding Gibo's right wrist with his two hands. Now he transferred one of his hands to the Indian's left wrist.

"Now Gibo has something better than the log to hold on to," said Bomba. "Bomba will not let go. Let Gibo swing up his legs and throw them over the log."

The first two attempts failed, but on the third the Indian succeeded in throwing one leg over. With this as a purchase, it was comparatively easy for the other leg to follow, and Gibo found himself astride the log in company with his leader. For a minute or two he sat there, panting, his eyes looking in unutterable devotion at his rescuer.

"Where would Gibo be if it were not for Bomba?" he gasped, when he could speak.

"Where would Bomba be if Gibo had not

crushed the head of the jararaca when it was about to strike?" returned the jungle lad simply. "It is in Bomba's heart to be very glad that he could reach Gibo before he fell into the den of snakes."

The man looked down into that writhing mass beneath him with a shudder that convulsed his whole frame.

"Let us get hence, Master," he said, and made as if to get to his feet.

But Bomba knew that in the Indian's present unstrung state it would be unsafe for him to stand erect.

"Let Gibo rest for a while," he said. "Then will Bomba and Gibo reach the further side of the pit."

They remained seated on the log for a few minutes longer, until the native's pulses were beating more regularly.

"Now will Bomba and Gibo go," said the jungle boy, as he arose and gave a hand to his follower to assist him to his feet. "Bomba will go first and Gibo will follow with his hand on Bomba's shoulder."

"No, Master," protested Gibo. "Then, if Gibo slips, he will draw Bomba with him."

"Have no fear," returned the lad. "If Gibo's feet slip, let his hand tighten on Bomba. Bomba's feet are sure."

They had made half the remaining distance when Bomba felt a slight sagging of the trunk.

He cast his eyes forward to the further edge of the pit and his pulses thrilled.

The struggle on the log while Bomba was trying to rescue Gibo had dislodged to some extent the position of the tree trunk on the further edge of the pit. Only the extreme edge of the log was now resting on the brink of the chasm, and that moved ominously with every step the two adventurers took. If the tree trunk slipped from its insecure resting place, it would go down among the snakes, carrying Bomba and Gibo with it.

Would it hold until the travelers reached the other side? If not, their doom was certain. And such a doom!

"Let Gibo tread very softly," warned Bomba, with a voice that was perfectly steady, despite the terrible peril. "Let him put down his feet as softly as a cat. Let him not ask Bomba why, but do as Bomba says."

"Yes, Master," replied Gibo submissively, sensing danger, but failing to see what it was because Bomba's form in front of him shut off his view.

With the utmost care they went forward, Bomba's eyes fastened upon the end of the tree trunk. To his dismay he saw that the end was now on the very edge of the chasm.

There was a premonitory trembling as it prepared to yield that last fraction of an inch.

"Let Gibo gather all his strength," said Bomba. "When Bomba shouts, let Gibo jump as the jaguar leaps when it springs upon its prey."

Another moment passed. They were within six feet of the edge of the pit.

"Jump!" cried Bomba.

He launched himself into the air just as the tree trunk fell. He landed fairly on the solid rock and whirled about.

Gibo had leaped at the same instant, and his feet struck on the very edge of the pit. He staggered there a moment, waving his arms wildly and trying to keep his balance.

In that instant Bomba sprang to him, wound his arms about him, and with a tremendous effort hurled him flat to the ground.

CHAPTER XXV

FINDING THE BURIED CHEST

WITH a great noise, the heavy tree trunk crashed down into the mass of snakes, doing tremendous execution, crushing them by the score.

The tables were turned. It was they who were the victims. Gibo looked down gleefully and spat.

But the Indian's glee was of short duration, for the frightened reptiles that were yet unmaimed and had escaped slaughter were scattering in all directions from the pit.

In a few moments the sides of the pit were alive with wriggling forms climbing toward the top.

"Let us hasten, Gibo, while there is yet time," cried Bomba.

The Indian needed no urging, and the pair hurried along the cavern passage at the highest speed of which their legs were capable.

And now, not only fear, but hope, also, added wings to their feet, for before them the cavern was certainly growing lighter.

"Light, Gibo!" cried Bomba exultantly.

"Bomba's eyes told him truly when he made up his mind to cross the pit of snakes. Soon Bomba and Gibo shall see the light of day."

The native's delight was equal to Bomba's own. All their weariness was forgotten as they pressed forward with redoubled speed.

At a great distance they could see what appeared to be the mouth of the cavern. It was only a speck at first, but as the wayfarers proceeded, it grew rapidly larger and their belief was confirmed. They were on their way to the blessed sunlight, to the open sky, to the fresh, sweet air of the outer world!

Then their hopes were dashed with startling suddenness.

The path, which had been narrowing, ended abruptly. They could not go another step! On one side was a blank wall! On the other was the river!

Bomba and Gibo looked at each other in bleak dismay. It was maddening to be blocked at the very moment they were on the verge of freedom from that horrific cavern.

They could not go forward. Nor could they go back. With the log fallen, it would be impossible to recross that den of snakes.

"Alas, Master," groaned Gibo, "it is the end. The demons of the place are laughing at Bomba and Gibo."

The jungle boy made no answer. His eyes were fixed upon the river.

At that point it had widened out and was of unknown breadth. The light of their torches did not permit them to see the further bank. Yet on that further bank, if anywhere, lay their chance of safety.

"Peace with such wailing, Gibo," said Bomba sharply to the man, who still continued to groan. "Let Gibo prepare to follow Bomba across the river. There may be a path on the other side that will lead to the mouth of the tunnel."

"The river, too, may be the abode of demons," moaned Gibo.

"How many times has Bomba told Gibo that there are no demons?" returned the jungle boy. "Come. Bomba and Gibo will swim to the further side."

The mere swimming of the river itself, unless it proved too broad, involved no danger in itself, for both Bomba and the Indian were almost as expert as fish in the water. But what those depths might conceal was another matter.

As always, however, when faced with a problem that offered no alternative, Bomba acted with quick decision.

"Let Gibo follow Bomba," he said, "and let him swim softly, making no more noise than the watersnake."

Silently, they let themselves down into the water and as noiselessly as possible struck out for the further side.

But there were eyes in that water that saw keenly, nostrils that sniffed hungrily, ears that could detect the faintest sound.

They had made the greater part of the journey, and already the further bank loomed up dimly when Bomba, in advance, was startled by a scream from Gibo.

Bomba turned just in time to see some leather-like tentacles waving above the water. Held tightly in one of those horrible feelers was the dark form of Gibo!

Bomba saw him for only an instant. The next he had disappeared, and only the foaming water told of the struggle going on beneath, as Gibo frantically tried to free himself from the terrible tentacles.

Like a flash Bomba dived, as he did so drawing his knife from its sheath.

Through the dim, green water he saw a confused blur.

He swam toward it and in a moment found himself entangled in those waving, rope-like feelers.

He slashed savagely at the one that was holding Gibo and nearly severed it.

It quivered and relaxed, freeing the Indian,

while its other tentacles sought again to grip the escaping victim and the newcomer as well.

Bomba's left arm was caught and held, and his body was drawn close to a great, circular body with a powerful sword-like beak, a great gash of a mouth, and huge, bulbous eyes as large as saucers.

Into that horrid, pulpy mass Bomba drove his knife again and again. The monster thrust with its beak, but Bomba evaded it and plunged his knife once more, this time into one of the horrible eyes.

That drive reached a vital part. There was a tremendous convulsion of the body and the tentacles relaxed and waved about wildly in the creature's death struggle.

Bomba dived deep to escape those entangling feelers, swam some distance under water, and then rose to the surface to find himself close to the bank and not far from Gibo.

"Hasten, Gibo!" gasped the lad. "There may be others."

In a moment more he had climbed up on the bank and reached out a hand to Gibo, who scrambled up and stood panting beside him.

"Is Gibo hurt?" asked Bomba, as soon as he could speak.

"No, Master," replied the native, still shaken

by his terrible experience. "Not greatly, though his arm is sore where the demon took hold."

He showed his arm, which was rasped and bleeding from the cup-like projections on the feeler that served to hold the creature's prey and draw it toward the beak, where it would be speedily torn to pieces.

"It is well that it is no worse," pronounced Bomba, as he washed the arm with water from the river. "It will be well by the time that Gibo has slept."

They rested for a while, taking care to keep at a safe distance from the river, lest the tentacles of another monster should reach out and drag them down.

Then Bomba rose and took note of his surroundings. He was rejoiced to find that there was a broad path leading along the bank of the Underground River.

"But the light, Master," wailed Gibo. "It cannot be seen."

It was true that what they had taken to be the mouth of the cavern had disappeared.

"Yet it cannot be far," declared Bomba. "For see! the river has put out the light of our torches, and yet there is light about us. Let us make haste."

A few minutes more, and as they rounded a

turning in the wall they came in full view of the cavern mouth only a few rods away.

"Light!" cried Bomba in a frenzy of rapture in which Gibo joined as they raced toward the opening.

On and on the pair raced, the way gradually becoming brighter and brighter until finally they burst out into the open air.

The open air! Sweeter and more delicious than the rarest of perfumes after their long imprisonment in that gloomy cavern!

The sunlight! The blessed sunlight, pouring down on them from an unclouded sky, bathing them in its warmth, illumining them with its radiance!

And the earth! The warm earth with its grass and shrubs and flowers basking in the sun, fertile in promise and performance, inviting them to couch themselves on the warm turf!

Gibo seemed as though he had lost his senses. He danced. He shouted. He threw himself down on the grass and rolled over and over. He babbled. He sang. He kissed the earth. He knelt and offered thanks to his gods.

Bomba, though less demonstrative, was quite as delighted as his faithful follower. He felt like a prisoner who had burst his chains and made his way to freedom. In his heart was thanksgiving far beyond words.

When they had recovered somewhat from their transports, they hunted up some turtle eggs and roasted them over a fire of twigs hastily assembled. A jaboty came within reach of Bomba's arrow and its meat was added to the feast.

For days they had had nothing but dried jaguar's meat and very little of that, but now they banqueted royally and ate until they could eat no more.

Now, with the first flush of happy excitement over, Bomba was deep in thought, while Gibo lay stretched lazily on the grass in full-fed animal contentment.

Despite the enormous relief of finding himself in the open air again, the jungle boy had reasons for discontent. He had to admit to himself that so far his errand had failed. He was apparently no nearer the object of his quest than when he and Gibo, so long a time before, had first plunged into the cavern where the Underground River flowed.

He had not lost sight of that quest for one moment. Even in the midst of their exciting adventures, his mind had dwelt unceasingly upon the buried chest.

He had sounded crevices in the walls. He had stamped upon the floor to see if it sounded hollow under his feet. But there had been nothing that

had given him the slightest clew, the faintest shadow of promise.

Had the whole thing been merely a vagary of Sobrinini's disordered mind? Had he endured all these perils in vain? Had he been the foolish victim of a mad woman's fantasy? Had not Gibo been wiser than he when he declared that there was no buried chest, that it had existed only in the ravings of the mad woman?

It seemed probable enough. He had traveled the whole length of the cavern without discovering a trace of it. As far as he knew, it was not in the cavern.

But what of that? A thought came to Bomba suddenly, bringing a resurgence of hope.

Sobrinini had not said it was in the cavern. She had said that it was on the course of the Underground River. That was a very different thing. The cavern and the river had become so associated in Bomba's mind that he had come to identify them. But they were not identical.

Granted that the chest was not in the cavern, it might still be somewhere along the course of the Underground River.

And they had not yet come to the end of that river. It ran beside them now, strong and full, its waters gleaming in the unaccustomed sunlight. Perhaps it ran on many miles farther before it vanished from sight or emptied into some larger

flood. As long as that river still flowed onward, Bomba would not relinquish his quest.

He turned to the native.

"Come, Gibo," he said, "let us be on our way."

The Indian rose happily.

"It will be good once more to find ourselves in the maloca of Hondura," he observed, with a pleased smile.

"Bomba and Gibo go not to the maloca of Hondura," replied Bomba. "They go still further along the Underground River."

Gibo's face fell. Consternation overspread his features.

"Bomba goes once more into the cave of the bottomless pits?" he queried dolefully.

"Whether the river goes into the cave again, Bomba does not know," was the response. "But wherever it goes, Bomba goes with it."

"Let Bomba be warned," implored Gibo. "It is not well to tempt the gods."

"Gibo can go to Hondura's maloca," returned the lad. "But if he does, he goes alone. Bomba follows the river."

"Gibo will go with Bomba. But Bomba and Gibo go to death."

They went along the river bank, which led directly toward a mountain a few thousand feet away. They reached the foot of the mountain

where once more the river plunged into a subterranean cavern.

"Another cave of bottomless pits!" murmured Gibo despairingly.

The jungle boy made no answer. His gaze, wandering over the mountain side, suddenly became fixed.

"Look, Gibo!" he cried, suddenly aflame with excitement. "The sign! The sign! The sign of which Sobrinini spoke!"

At that spot the river bank broadened out into a flat rocky shore. This was backed up on the mountain side by tier upon tier of rocks, rising above each other like rows of seats, for all the world like an opera house or other great place of assembly. It answered precisely Sobrinini's description of the place near which the chest was buried.

"The sign!" repeated Bomba, his eyes blazing with excitement. "Let us look, Gibo. Let us find the place of the chest and dig."

They went to and fro over the rocky surface like hounds intent upon the scent.

The plateau was almost entirely of rock, but in one place they came upon a little space of earth about six feet in diameter lying in a hollow.

"It may be here!" cried Bomba. "Dig, Gibo! Dig!"

They possessed themselves of sharp pieces of flint and dug frantically.

At a depth of about four feet Bomba's flint struck something hard that gave back a ringing metallic sound.

"It is here!" cried Bomba exultantly. "Dig! Dig!"

They redoubled their efforts and soon brought to light an oblong steel box about four feet in length and two feet in width.

Straining their muscles, they raised the heavy steel chest to the surface. It was stained and tarnished, but intact.

It was not locked, but where the lid came down it was rusted to the lower part so that it was hard to force it open.

They succeeded at last, and with trembling fingers Bomba raised the lid.

On the top was folded a rich opera cloak, once magnificent but now faded, though it shimmered with some touch of its former beauty in the sun as Bomba shook out its folds. Probably it had once been worn by Sobrinini and retained by her as a relic of her former glory.

Under this was a canvas which, unrolled, disclosed the face of a man so closely resembling Bomba that Gibo was startled.

"It is Bomba himself!" he exclaimed.

"No, Gibo. It is Bomba's father," replied the lad, as he scanned the picture.

A strong face, a sensitive face, a finely chiseled face, the face of an artist and a gentleman. Would Bomba ever see that face in the flesh? He wondered—and hoped.

There were other sketches, several of Laura, Bomba's beautiful mother, others of a child in whom he recognized himself. There was a picture also of Sobrinini in the prime of her career, so rarely beautiful that Bomba hardly dared to think of the haggard witch woman whom he had buried weeks before.

There were other things too, a jewel case, photographs, bills of operatic performances, few of which had any meaning to the untutored mind of the jungle boy.

But there were other things at the sight of which Bomba's heart leaped—books, some in printing, some in writing, some in English, others in foreign languages, bundles of letters, leather-bound diaries.

Here indeed was a treasure trove. Sobrinini had told him that they would tell him of his parents. Bomba looked at them with emotion.

He could not read them. But Casson could read them. Those strange characters would talk to Casson and Casson would understand, and then the cravings of Bomba's heart would be answered.

He would learn about his parents! He would find out where they were! With these clues to guide him he would search the world over until he found them!

Thrilling with happiness and new-found hope, Bomba, with Gibo's help, gathered the contents of the chest together—the chest itself was too heavy to be taken along—bound them into a package for each to carry, and wrapped them securely with tendrils of vines.

"Has Bomba found what he wanted to find?" asked Gibo, to whom the strange books and letters conveyed no meaning.

"Bomba has found things very precious," cried the jungle boy rapturously. "His heart is light. He thanks the gods. But hasten, Gibo. We must go as the arrow flies. Bomba must find Casson, for to Casson alone will the writings speak and give to Bomba the desire of his heart. Come!"

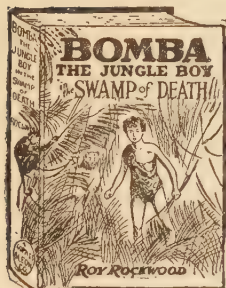
Bomba and Gibo shouldered their packs and struck out through the jungle for the maloca of Hondura.

THE END

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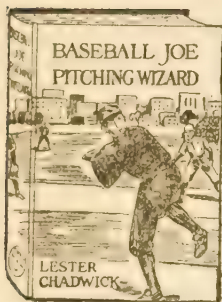
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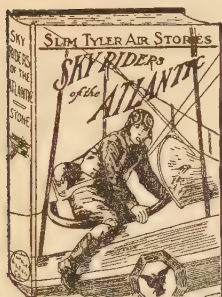
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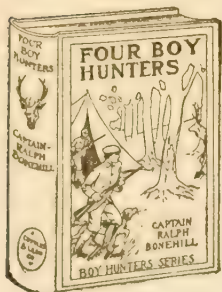
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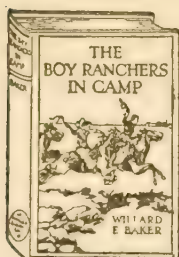
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